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SWINDLER'S DAUGHTER

Annette K. Larsen

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For the many who have become part of my family-	—through blood or marriage or for being my merry band of m	r simply because we understand of isfits.	one another. Thank you

Prologue

Before

I'd nearly been caught today, picking the pocket of a man at the festival. Luckily, when he'd turned and looked straight at me, all he saw was an innocent ten-year-old girl. Papa always told me that my honest face was my biggest asset. I'd mastered looking wide-eyed and curious when I was four.

Unfortunately, Papa had seen today's near miss and made me work longer hours to make up for the fact that a mark had nearly caught me. And even after I'd climbed into bed dead tired, I couldn't fall asleep. Papa had met some men, and they were talking around the fire, bursting into loud, annoying laughter each time I was on the verge of sleep. When I finally did drift off, it was a fitful sleep. I kept having dreams about being caught. A mark would reach out and grab my arm before I could run away. Or I would make a clean grab, only to be confronted by a lawman, which was even worse than being caught by a mark. Or my father would be shaking my shoulder, screaming at me for not being careful enough.

He just kept shaking and shaking.

"Miri!" someone hissed in my ear.

That's when I realized the shaking wasn't a dream. I groaned and rolled over, trying to shove my brother away. I knew it had to be Hunter. He was the only one who called me Miri.

"Go away," I muttered, in no mood to wake up when I knew it wasn't morning.

A hand clamped over my mouth. "You have to be quiet," Hunter warned in a whisper, and suddenly I was wide awake. Hunter wouldn't risk scaring me for no reason, and the panic in his voice was definitely scaring me.

I looked over at him, but there was nothing but shadows inside our peddler's wagon. I could hear Hunter's shallow breathing, along with my father's snoring that came from the other end of the wagon. I finally nodded so Hunter would know that I understood.

He slowly removed his hand. "We have to leave, Miri."

"Leave where?" I asked in my quietest whisper.

"Just help me gather some things and come with me. I'll explain later."

"But where are we going?" I asked as I pushed myself up from my pallet, rubbing at my eyes.

"Shh," he warned again. Then he sighed. "Do you trust me?" he asked.

"Of course I do." That had never been a question. I'd always known I could rely on my brother. He was almost five years older than I was, and he had always taken care of me. He made sure I got something to eat when Papa forgot about such things. When Papa got upset, he took the blame even if it was my fault.

"Then come outside with me. Make sure you grab your shoes and shawl."

My face scrunched in confusion, but I pushed my blankets off and got up to do as he asked. Soon Hunter was lifting the latch on the door, then he jumped out before helping me to the ground. He kept quiet, closing the door again in complete silence before strapping a large pack to his back. Then he took my hand and pulled me away from our camp.

I wanted to ask him where we were going, but I held my tongue. He'd promised to explain, so I would wait until he thought it was time.

We found the narrow, rutted path that led to the main road and walked along it. And still Hunter didn't talk; he just kept walking farther and farther from the wagon, from our home. From Papa.

I gulped and couldn't keep my questions in anymore. "Are we running away, Hunter?"

"Yes," he said, his pace quick and steady.

"Are we running away from Papa?"

"Yes."

My thoughts tripped over the idea for only a moment. It was easy to know how I felt about it. It was scary, but also a little exciting. My stomach felt uncomfortable. "Who will take care of us?" I asked. Papa was always grumbling about how hard it was to take care of us, how lucky we were to have him. Even though I didn't feel lucky all the time, I figured he would know better than I would.

"Me," Hunter answered. "I'm going to take care of both of us."

"We don't have a wagon to live in."

"I know, Miri, but trust me. It will be better this way. It will be safer."

"How?"

Hunter's steps slowed, and he finally stopped and turned to look at me. I could just make out his features in the light of the half-moon. "Do you know what Papa was doing with those men around the fire?"

My shawl slipped down one arm and I impatiently pulled it up to my shoulder again. "He was trying to strike a deal. He's always striking deals." That was what my father called it when he conned someone out of their money. "What does it matter?"

"I think this deal is going to go bad," he said, his voice tight and his eyes flitting from one dark tree to the next like he was expecting trouble. "It sounded worse than the others. We can't risk getting caught when he gets caught." He started walking again, grabbing my hand and tugging me along behind him.

"Papa never gets caught," I pointed out.

He made a noise of disgust in his throat. "Well, maybe he should."

I thought about what he was suggesting, about how it would be different. It was scary to think of trying to live without Papa's protection, without a home... "Does this mean we'll get to keep everything we take?" I asked, trying to look on the bright side. "Will we get to decide what to spend our money on?"

Hunter heaved a sigh. "Yes, we'll get to decide. But, Miri," he said as he suddenly stopped and turned to me. "We're not taking things anymore."

My brow furrowed and I frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I'm going to find work for us to do. We'll find someone who will pay us a wage to do chores. I'm done being a festival rat. We're going to *earn* our money now."

One side of my face screwed up in confusion. "We were earning it before. We worked hard for the money we took." That's what life as a festival rat meant. We traveled from village to village with the other peddlers and performers. We sold our wares. Papa swindled any mark he could find while Hunter and I picked pockets.

Hunter groaned then turned and kept walking. "It's not the same. I don't want to be a thief anymore, Miri. We are *not* going to be thieves anymore."

I stayed quiet, but my frown remained. I didn't understand the difference. Papa had trained me to do a job, to earn money. And I'd been good at it. How could I help Hunter earn money if I couldn't do what I was good at?

Seven Years Later

It irked me that I found Rowan attractive, but laws, I couldn't help it. And those few moments here and there when it seemed like he was flirting with me didn't help matters. He was overly confident, bordering on arrogant. So it was horribly distracting when he did things like this, stepping up behind me, speaking so close to my ear as he used his hands to adjust the grip I had on my bow or the direction my shoulders were facing.

Horribly distracting.

"Raise your arm just a bit," he directed.

His words hit the back of my neck, and I instinctively rolled my shoulder away from him as a shudder ran down my spine.

"Everything all right?" he asked, and I could hear the smile in his voice. He was teasing me.

I threw my elbow back, catching him in the ribs.

He let out a short groan but turned it into a laugh as he stepped back.

I looked over my shoulder with a glare. "Do you enjoy riling me?"

He straightened, looking not nearly as hurt as I wished him to be, a wicked grin fixed in place. Then he gave a shrug and shook his blond waves out of his eyes. "A little."

I rolled my eyes. Why could he never be serious? "Do I need to find someone else to teach me?" Not that I would. He may be arrogant, but there was something exciting about being around him.

"Do you know many chaps who have the skill and time to teach you how to use a bow and arrow?" he asked.

"I'm sure I could find another," I said with a stubborn tilt of my head.

"One who lives close enough that you can walk over for your lessons?" Now he was grinning.

Curse him. My threat was empty, and he knew it just as well as I did. He knew there was no one else to teach me. I was a servant, for heaven's sake, with little free time and limited interactions with anyone outside of Sutton Manor and its grounds. Rowan was the son of Sutton's gamekeeper. He had the skills I needed in a teacher, and he lived here on the property.

When I'd first approached him several months ago, I'd been so nervous and excited—so preoccupied with the challenge of learning the bow and arrow—that I'd been able to ignore the attraction I felt—at least for a few weeks. But the more we'd interacted, and the more comfortable he became around me, the more difficult it was to ignore how my insides squirmed with every look, every smile. He was arrogant, yes, but he was also sweet and charming. I would even venture to say he was dangerously charming with his blue eyes and his easy grin. That charm was what kept me from flirting in return. I'd spent my younger years peddling my father's wares at festivals among the other riffraff. I knew all too well how charm could be used to manipulate, so if that was his game, he'd get nowhere with me.

I heaved a sigh and rolled my eyes over to him. "While I do appreciate you being willing to take a

bit of time each week to teach me, our time would probably be better spent focusing on my shooting instead of how you can distract me from it."

"Right. Of course." He cleared his throat as though deliberately falling out of the role of charmer and into the role of teacher. "Let's see how you're doing with your speed."

I pressed my lips, hating these little tests. He claimed it was to measure my progress, but that was a lie.

He stepped up beside me, his own bow in hand. "Ready?"

I nodded.

"Three. Two. One. Draw."

We both drew, nocked, pulled back, and shot. He was twice as fast as I was. I sighed. "Laws," I cursed under my breath. Even out of the corner of my eye, I could see that Rowan was grinning.

The reason for these tests was so that he could show off.

"You're getting faster," he commented.

"But not fast enough?" I asked, anticipating criticism.

He shrugged. "I grew up with a bow in my hand. If a few months of practice could put you on pace with me, that would be a sad assessment of my skills."

I frowned. That observation sounded strangely logical and lacked his usual arrogance.

"What do you mean to do with these skills anyway?" he asked as he rolled another arrow between his thumb and fingers.

I shrugged.

"Will you join the competitions like Emeline?"

"I doubt it," I said as I studied the spot where my arrow had sunk into the target. It was on the very edge, barely hanging on. At this point, I could manage a bit of speed or a bit of accuracy, but not both. "I'm more interested in having the skills than in showing them off."

"You think Emeline is a show-off?"

I turned to look at him. "That is not what I said," I corrected, worried that he would go off and start a rumor that I was insulting my brother's wife behind her back. I loved Emeline.

He smiled. "I was kidding."

"Well, please don't. I like Emeline very much and would hate for her to hear otherwise."

He gave a single nod. "Understood. Precision this time. Ready?"

I fumbled to draw an arrow from my quiver and ended up missing the target entirely.

His cheeky grin made me glower. He truly was arrogant.

Even so, he was a good teacher when he wanted to be. Patient, precise, willing to explain then demonstrate, then explain again if necessary. He seemed genuinely happy to teach me and never appeared annoyed or inconvenienced by my questions.

Plus, he was incredibly skilled. I suppose growing up as the gamekeeper's son had a hand in that, but it was obvious that not only did he enjoy shooting, he also put a lot of time into honing his skills.

When our time was up, he set his bow aside and held his hand out toward me.

My mind went blank. Did he want me to place my hand in his? A flush rushed to my cheeks.

Then he spoke. "The quiver," he said, nodding toward my shoulder.

I winced, giving myself a swift internal reprimand for thinking that Rowan would do anything so romantic as wishing to take my hand. Laws, I wished I could control the way I responded to him. I took the quiver from where it hung at my back and handed it over.

When I'd purchased my own bow, I'd only had enough money for a handful of arrows to practice with, and Rowan had been kind enough to offer his own for these practice sessions. He made his own

arrows and thus had a plethora of them.

"'Til next time," he said with a cocky turn of his mouth, then he slung the two quivers over one shoulder and started toward his cottage, cutting through the herb garden that he maintained. Rowan would no doubt take over for his father as Sir James Sutton's gamekeeper one day, but his principal duties for now were growing and tending to the herbs that were gathered and used for healing at the manor house.

Once I'd pried my eyes away from his swaggering retreat, I took up my own bow and walked in the direction of the manor. The Lockley cottage was in the woods that separated Sutton land from the neighboring estate of Bridgefield.

As I left the trees, I heard the call of "Ho there, Miri."

I looked up to see Johnny striding toward me, a staff propped on his enormous shoulder. Johnny was tall, broad, and muscular with an open, friendly disposition.

"Hello, Johnny." He was one of the few aside from my brother who'd taken to calling me Miri. He and I had an easy friendship. We'd simply gotten along from the moment I started working at Sutton Manor a year ago. I noted the dirt caked onto the knees of his trousers. "Keeping yourself tidy and clean, I see."

He paused to strike a pose. "Of course. I always strive to be a proper gent."

"It looks like you were beaten. Has someone finally figured out how to best you with a staff?" I asked, knowing he'd just come from training.

"No, but going up against Falstone's sword is a proper challenge."

"What about Tyson and Oliver?" I asked, since they were only a little younger than Johnny.

He grinned, knowing very well that his sheer size gave him an unfair physical advantage over the others. "I'm afraid neither has ever managed to beat me, but they give one another a challenge, so they're always improving."

"And Gretchen?"

He heaved a sigh. "I thought she'd tire of playing with swords, but if I'm honest, she's still better than Ansel is."

Gretchen was Johnny's sister and the youngest of those who trained with Falstone. Ansel was older than she was, but only by half a year. They were both twelve and had become the best of friends. "I look forward to the day she can beat you," I teased.

He let out a laugh. "That would be a sight, wouldn't it?" He eyed my bow. "Rowan treating you all right?"

I rolled my eyes. "He's arrogant."

Johnny let out a deep bark of laughter. "Yes, but the man can shoot."

"He can," I conceded. "And he is a good teacher," I admitted grudgingly.

"Glad to hear it." He grinned. "We'll make a warrior of you yet."

I shook my head with a smile and waved as he walked away toward his own home on the neighboring estate. Johnny worked at Bridgefield, the house owned but rarely used by the sovereign Duke of Winberg.

I knew our little corner of the world was odd. Servants didn't usually train with weapons, but it was Johnny who had started it all. He'd had aspirations as a boy for being a spy, and when Princess Marilee's guard, Falstone, had offered to train him up a bit, plenty of others had fallen in line. Even I had toyed with the idea of learning the sword.

Then I'd seen the archery competition at the festival last year. And I'd fallen in love. Archery was just so elegant compared to the sword, and from that moment on, I'd scrimped and saved bit by bit,

stashing away a portion of my earnings each month until I had enough to buy my own bow.

That bow was my most prized possession, and I was eager to learn how to wield it with speed, precision, and grace.

After my archery lesson, I returned to the kitchen to find the cook, Emeline, humming as she baked. She hummed a lot lately, ever since she'd married my brother.

"Hello," I greeted.

She turned to me, her face bright with contentment. "How was your lesson?"

"He says I'm getting better." No need to mention the way his teasing caused my ribs to tighten.

"Of course you are. You've taken to it like a duck to water."

I stashed my bow in the back corner of the kitchen then set about the task of washing dishes.

Emeline continued to hum, and when she pulled her pastries from the oven, filling the air with their sweet scent, I realized what day it was. "Having tea with Her Highness?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, looking at me with a little crease of worry in her brow. "I hope it won't create too much extra work for you."

I gave a little shake of my head. "That's what you always say. And I don't mind a little extra work." "I still feel bad for leaving my duties to you," she said as she arranged biscuits in a napkin-lined basket, and set the still-warm pastries on a tray.

"They're my duties too, and I can handle it." I knew that it wasn't the extra duties that truly bothered her. Emeline had never gotten over feeling bad that she and the lady of the house were on friendly terms. Not that Princess Marilee wasn't friendly to everyone. She was, which was odd enough, but the oddness was compounded by the continued ritual of taking tea with her cook, housekeeper, and former lady's maid. Emeline, Beatrice, and Cecily had all been with the princess since she'd married her first husband. Their bond made sense considering their history and what they'd been through together, but I also understood why Emeline felt conspicuous because of it. "Here," I said, reaching for a plate covered in sugar-dusted goodness. "I'll help you take these up."

She acquiesced and we made our way out to the veranda, setting the baked goods on the side table. This was to be the princess's last hurrah with her three good friends before she and Sir James left for nearly three months. Now that baby Gabriella was old enough to travel, Marilee was determined to have a good, long visit with her family in the neighboring Kingdom of Dalthia.

We would become a household without a master or mistress. It would be very odd, having the house full of no one but servants. There would surely be less work, more free time, and more freedom in general. I loved Her Highness and could truthfully say that I would miss her, but I was excited to experience such a reprieve.

I left Emeline to fuss over the arrangement of the pastries and made my way back through the house just as Princess Marilee was coming down the stairs with the nursemaid, Jane, trailing behind her. Jane carried Gabriella on one hip and held Seraphina's hand on her other side.

"We're going to Cecily's cottage so I can play with Miles," Seraphina chattered as she jumped from step to step.

"Yes, you are," Marilee assured her. "And Charles will be there as well."

"Gabby can play with him. They're both little."

"Too true," I heard Marilee agree as I slipped down the hall and back into the kitchen.

Instead of finding the kitchen empty, I found my brother there, staring around at the pots and cutlery as if utterly confused. "Where is my wife?" Hunter asked the moment I came in the door.

I smiled. "You enjoy saying that, don't you?"

"What? You mean referring to *my wife*?" A smile swept over his mouth as if he simply couldn't hold it back. "It never gets old."

"Well, your wife is having tea out on the veranda."

"Ah. That explains it. There's not much that pulls her away from this kitchen, and I knew she wasn't training." He looked me over. "I suppose you were doing your own training this morning?"

I nodded.

He reached out and tugged on one of my bright curls. "Soon all the women in my life will be able to beat me in a fight."

I snorted a laugh. "I could likely only hit you if you held very still and gave me several tries."

He picked up an apple and leaned back against the counter that sat beneath the window. "That may be the case now, but I'm sure it won't be for long. You still enjoy it?" He bit into the crisp apple.

Now I was the one grinning. "Very much."

"Good," he said around a thoughtful mouthful. "Do you get along with that Lockley boy well enough?"

I smirked at him. "I'm fairly certain *that Lockley boy* is as much a man as you are," I pointed out. He smiled wide. "That's not saying much."

I snorted a laugh.

"Well," he said, pushing off the counter, "I suppose I'll be off. Tell Em I stopped by." He opened the back door.

"I will." I watched out the window as he walked toward the stables, happy that he was happy. He and Emeline had been married about six months. They were friends, confidants, lovers.

I envied them.

While Emeline was gone, I sank into the comfort of making bread, allowing the routine to relax me. When Emeline returned with the tea tray in hand less than an hour later, I had moved on to dinner

preparations.

"I'll go get the rest," I said, dusting off my palms before making my way out to the veranda where Princess Marilee and Cecily still sat. I did my best to be unobtrusive as I gathered the serving dishes from the side table.

"Why do you look so worried?" Cecily was asking Her Highness.

"Because I don't enjoy being the bearer of bad news." Princess Marilee let out a sigh. "It's going to be Reeve," she said carefully.

There was one long moment of tense silence. "He's to be Murrwood's new magistrate?" Cecily burst out, her voice hard with anger.

"Unfortunately," Princess Marilee confirmed. "I realize he was only doing his job, but from what you've told me about your encounter with him, I can't like that he's the one taking over for Phillips."

Cecily snorted. "No, indeed. He seems to take pleasure in violence, and he enjoys the power. He was more than happy to help the captain force my hand." I saw her brow furrowed in consternation as I was leaving. "He's a terrible choice for such a position." Cecily's indignant voice faded as I returned to the kitchen with my arms full.

So we were to have a new magistrate? And one that Her Highness did not approve of. It was difficult for me to imagine that it would change much about our lives. I'd spent so many years traveling, never a citizen of any specific town or village, that worrying about local politics still seemed strange. In the life of a peddler, lawmen were meant to be avoided and never trusted. So the idea of not trusting this new magistrate felt normal to me, and yet both Cecily and Princess Marilee seemed deeply concerned by it. I suppose it was just one more example of the way my early years

made me different.

Cecily's concerns stuck in my head, and my curiosity about the situation wouldn't let go. What had this new magistrate done to convince her he was such a terrible person?

That evening, I climbed the stairs to the room I shared with Nellie, another maid. Nellie was quiet and content.

She had also been here longer than I had. "Nellie?" I asked, interrupting her efforts to ready for bed.

She looked up at me. "Hm?" Nellie didn't feel the need to fill the silence, and she didn't expect others to either, but when I did have something to say, she was always a good listener.

"Were you here when that man—a captain, I think—came for Cecily?" I'd heard bits and pieces of the story from Emeline but didn't know all the details. By the time I'd come to work here, Cecily was already married and had a family and home of her own to keep her busy.

"You mean Captain Huckley?"

Was that his name? "I think so."

"No," she said, tying a knot at the end of her braid. "That was before my time. Why do you ask?"

"I think perhaps the new magistrate was involved somehow. He left a very bad impression on Cecily and Her Highness."

"Who is it?"

"Reeve. Do you know him?"

She shrugged. "Not really. He's a constable, has been for years, and he takes great pride in it."

"Hmm." We lapsed into silence and I readied for bed. I'd have to pay better attention when I was in the village. I liked the little corner of life I'd made for myself. I didn't need a lawman to disrupt it.

The market of Murrwood Village was full to bursting. I was enjoying my time away from the manor. I loved my job and was grateful for a safe place to live. Hunter had found stability for both of us when he'd brought us to Sutton, and I valued that tremendously, but I had accepted long ago that there would always be an ache inside me to see a little more of the world. I suppose that's what comes of growing up in a peddler's wagon with a father who was always chasing the next festival or the next mark to swindle.

I missed traveling across the realm. I missed sleeping under the wide expanse of stars when the weather allowed it. So my days of walking to the market and doing the shopping for the Sutton Manor kitchens were good for me. And as it turned out, the things my father had taught me were good for more than swindling people.

I had excellent negotiation skills.

"Three coppers?" I asked, balking at the cost that Selworth was demanding. "I'll give you two."

"Afraid not, Miriam."

"Fine then. Three. But you'll need to throw in an extra measure," I said, gesturing toward the bowl of nuts from which he'd taken the original amount.

He shook his head. "Can't do it."

"Two extra measures."

His eye twitched. "What?"

"Three extra, and a vial of that oil."

"Miriam—"

"Shall I go higher?"

He growled. "Go on with you. Take your extra measure," he said, scooping another handful into the pouch that contained my original request. He tossed it to me and then held out his hand for payment.

I gave him a brilliant smile and handed over the three coppers. "Always lovely to see you, Selworth," I said and slipped away while he grumbled.

After collecting everything on my list, I made my way back through the market, this time enjoying the sights and smells, the hustle and hurry.

A commotion caught my attention. Shouts of protest and surprise rumbled through the crowd.

I pushed up on my toes, trying to see what the ruckus was about. Shock rippled through me when Johnny came rushing through the crowd, elbowing his way past the others. He kept looking over his shoulder as though someone was chasing him. Was he in trouble?

As he neared, I called out to get his attention. "Johnny! What's going on?"

His eyes locked with mine, and he immediately veered my way, shoving a bundle into my hands and then pulling my cloak over it.

"What are you—" I started to protest.

"Keep this for me. Please, Miri?" His eyes pled for understanding.

"I—" I did not understand, and I didn't get the chance to, because Rowan caught up to Johnny and

grabbed his arm.

"We have to go, John!" Rowan insisted.

Johnny stumbled a few steps, giving me one more desperate look before chasing after his friend.

I stared at their retreating backs, flummoxed and frozen until another disturbance pulled my attention in the opposite direction. A constable was now fighting his way through the crowd, his face red with anger and exertion.

I turned away to better conceal the parcel that Johnny had entrusted to me, waiting until the constable's angry shouts faded. Then I quickly stuffed the package beneath the collection of items in my large basket and went on my way, refusing to make eye contact with those around me. One or more of them might have seen exactly what had happened and could point the lawman in my direction.

What had Johnny done? Had Rowan dragged him into it? Or was this Johnny's idea? I quickened my steps, anxious to get out of the market.

The road that ran through Murrwood Forest from the village to Sutton Manor was familiar and usually comfortable. But the tall trees and the rustling breeze made me anxious as I walked along with the strange bundle hidden away in my basket. Once I was far enough outside the village that there was no one else on the road with me, I set down my basket and dug inside, pulling out the parcel Johnny had thrust into my hands.

It certainly had weight. Though it looked to be a bundle of rags, I could feel that whatever was inside was significant. I quickly unwound the rags until a leather pouch fell out. It made a distinct jingling sound when it landed in my hands.

A money pouch.

My eyes darted around, ensuring that no one was in sight on the road. I weighed the pouch in my hand. By the heft of it, I would guess there were perhaps twenty coins inside.

Curse it.

I rewrapped the pouch in its rags and stuffed it deep inside my basket, cursing Rowan's and Johnny's names all the way home. What were they thinking? And how dare they drag me into it! I'd spent my childhood on the wrong side of the law; I could not, would not, return there now.

Rowan and Johnny were stealing. Not just a piece of fruit off an apple cart but an entire pouch of coins.

When I reached the edge of Sutton property, I slipped into the woods. I could not bring a stolen bag of coins into the house with me. What if someone found them? What if I lost them?

Instead I walked along the stream that ran through the woods until I found a spot at the base of a tree and dug a shallow hole where I could bury it. Before placing the pouch into the hole, I unwrapped it once more, and this time I pulled the top open and poured the contents into my hands. I'd been wrong: there were twenty-seven coins that spilled into my palm. Two gold pieces, five silver pieces, eight coppers, and twelve bits. I'd never held so much at once before, and I'd *never* held a gold piece in my hand. My father had always collected my earnings each day, and he usually spent it before he could accumulate any real amount. I lifted my hand until I found a patch of sunlight and then admired the coins as they glinted.

Then I snatched my hand closed and shoved the coins back into the pouch. After pulling the strings tight and wrapping it back in the rags, I tucked it into the hole, pushing dirt over it and using branches and leaves to conceal it further. I stood and took a good look around, making certain that I knew exactly where it was and how to come back to it, before grabbing my basket and hurrying through the woods, past the pasture filled with horses, past the garden, and into the kitchen.

I'd been dragged into a thieving plot by my thieving friend and my thieving teacher.

I set the basket on the counter and hung my shawl behind the door, my movements stiff with anger and worry.

"Are you all right, Miri?"

I turned toward Emeline, who stood at the counter, peeling potatoes. "What?" I asked, worried that she somehow knew I had just buried a bag of *stolen* goods on the property.

"You look frazzled," she observed.

"Oh. I'm fine. Just got distracted in the village and worried I'd be late getting back." *That was mostly true*, I told myself to justify the lie.

"Well then, you can start making the crust for this meat-and-vegetable pie."

A task. That was precisely what I needed, and I was grateful for the chance to practice. Pie crusts were something Emeline had taught me how to make over the past year, but I still struggled with having them turn out well every time.

I gathered ingredients and worked to the sound of Emeline's humming in the background. My knot of worry and stress slowly eased.

She checked my progress a couple times, silently looking over my shoulder.

"Do you not trust me with this task?" I teased.

"Of course I do, but this is the family's last week here before they're gone for months, and I'm determined to feed them well."

"You're always determined to feed them well, and you always do."

A high-pitched wail echoed through the house for just a moment. Emeline let out a sigh. "It's going to be very quiet around here without the girls causing trouble."

She was right. I would miss the sound of little voices and little feet. I'd even gotten used to the baby's cries.

The usual sound of Falstone's morning training session filled the air as I pulled water from the well. The clashing of wooden practice swords and the patient words of instruction were part of Sutton Manor's cadence.

"Let's go again," I heard Tyson demand of Oliver.

Gretchen and Ansel ran by, their swords forgotten since Gretchen had challenged Ansel to a footrace.

As the heavy laden bucket was nearing the top of the well, I felt someone's eyes on me. When I looked up, it didn't take long to realize it was Johnny giving me one furtive look after another.

I pressed my lips in agitation and heaved the bucket higher, grabbing onto it and pouring its contents into the basin I'd brought out. When I looked up again, Johnny was staring. I narrowed my eyes, glaring fiercely. I still couldn't believe he would be so brazen that he'd turn to thieving. He worked in the house of the duke's family; surely they paid him a good wage!

As I set the full basin on the ground, Johnny stepped away from the little group of trainees and closer to me, waving as if he wanted me to cross the distance between us.

I didn't. I planted a hand on my hip and stood right there by the well, waiting.

He seemed to realize I wasn't going to move and crossed to me instead, his expression far more hopeful and far less guilty than it should be—and that irked me. "Do you, uh," he started when he was close enough, "have something for me?" He spoke out of the corner of his mouth.

"No." My voice was flat and angry.

His eyes turned worried as he looked at me. "I really do need it back, Miri."

"Need what back, exactly?" I asked, crossing my arms over my chest as I narrowed my eyes at him.

"The bundle I gave you," he said quietly. "We need it back."

"The bundle? Don't you mean the pouch of money you *stole*?"

He had the audacity to heave a sigh as he pinched the bridge of his nose. "Yes, Miri. The pouch. Rowan and I need it back. Do you have it with you or not?"

"Do you really think that I would be stupid enough to keep a jangling purse of coins in my pocket? I'm not an idiot."

"Right. Where is it, then?"

"In the woods," I said, nodding toward the trees.

"Where in the woods?" he snipped at me.

That earned him another glare. "Don't you dare get cross with me, Johnny. I'll get you the stupid pouch, but I can't exactly run off in the middle of work, can I?"

"Right. Sorry," he said, looking appropriately contrite. "And I really do thank you for taking care of it for me. We were in a bit of a fix."

"You are most certainly *not* welcome," I said as I bent to heft the basin of water.

"We didn't steal it, you know."

I raised an eyebrow at him.

"Well, we did. But I can explain."

I pinned him with another glare. "I very much doubt that. I'll meet you by the stream at sunset." I turned my back on him and walked toward the manor house.

"Fine," he agreed. "And it's not what you think."

"That's what thieves always tell themselves," I muttered as I walked away. Thieves always had justification for why they did what they did. Some were even desperate enough that I might understand it. But Johnny? Rowan? There was no excuse.

It was difficult not to stomp around the rest of the day, but behavior like that would make people ask questions that I wasn't ready to answer.

I finished my work in plenty of time but dawdled on purpose so that I would be late to meet Johnny. Let him squirm. He deserved it.

Wrapping myself in my shawl, I headed across the grounds and into the woods. The sun was nearly touching the horizon by the time I approached the stream.

"She's not going to come," I heard someone hiss.

I stopped to listen.

"Of course she'll come. She said she would." That was Johnny's voice, so I had to assume that the first belonged to Rowan. I took a few more steps and leaned around a tree so I could see the two of them standing there, tense and nervous.

Rowan picked up a rock and hurled it into the water. "I still can't believe you just gave her the pouch."

"What did you want me to do?" Johnny asked as he leaned on his staff. "Throw it away? Wait till we were caught and have them find it on us? On me?"

"It's all for nothing if she doesn't return it." Rowan fidgeted as he paced.

"I know Miri. She'll give it back."

"I know her too, and I'm betting she won't."

The temptation to keep it simply as retribution for Rowan's lack of trust in me was strong. It wasn't mine. Of course I wouldn't keep it. Granted, it wasn't theirs either, so that did complicate the morality of the situation.

Still, I wanted nothing to do with it.

I stomped toward them, my chin high, my neck stiff.

"Miri," Johnny said as his shoulders sagged. "Right on time. Thanks for coming."

"Follow me" was all I said as I passed by them both and headed to the spot where I'd buried their filthy lucre.

"Listen, Miri," Johnny started as he trailed after me. "We only took—"

I whirled to face them, my hands up in front of me. "I don't want to hear it," I insisted. "So if I'm to give this *parcel* back to you, it's with the understanding that you don't try to justify it. Not to me."

They both shook their heads in frustration, but when they realized I was serious, they were forced to give each other one heavy look and then nod their heads.

"Fine," Rowan agreed. "But if you ever want to know more, you need only ask."

I turned without a word and continued on.

"We really do appreciate this, Miri. Don't we, Rowan?"

There was a distinct "Oof" before Rowan coughed and said, "Yes. Of course. We owe you for this."

"You owe me nothing," I insisted as we neared my hiding spot. "And if anyone comes around asking about a missing pouch full of money"—I looked over my shoulder to pin them with a look—"I won't lie."

Rowan raised his hands as if in surrender. "Fair enough."

He didn't look nearly as frightened by my threat as I wished, but there was nothing I could do about that.

I approached the tree beneath which I'd hidden the pouch and brushed the leaves and debris aside. I dug it out of the soil and held it out to them. "Take it and go. I want nothing to do with it."

"You might feel differently if you knew why we took it," Rowan said as he reached for the package. I yanked it back as a warning.

"Sorry," he muttered.

I extended the package again, and Rowan accepted it from me. His fingers brushed mine, and I snatched my hand back as soon as he caught hold of the pouch.

I didn't let myself consider what he'd said. I just shook my head and walked away from them. A thief was a thief. I'd been reciting that to myself for the past seven years.

"Will you be at your next lesson?" Rowan asked.

I stuttered to a stop. My anger and indignation wanted me to say no, but if I said no—if I didn't have Rowan to teach me—then how could I get any better with my bow?

I hesitated for three long beats, trying to think of a way to both continue my practice and show these two foolish lads just how much I disapproved of them, but I was at a loss. So I just said a stiff "Yes" and went my way.

The fact that I had to compromise my morals in order to keep learning a skill that I was desperate to acquire was maddening. I hated that Johnny was my friend, which made it impossible to hate him for what he'd done or to turn him in. I hated that I was tempted to listen to their justifications. One part of me wanted to know why they were doing this, but the bigger part of me was too afraid they'd convince me they were right. Then I would justify it. And then what? What would I find to justify with an excuse next?

I had been called on to assist Princess Marilee's lady's maid, Kaelyn, in packing Her Highness's things in preparation for the family's trip. It was good to have the extra work. It kept me from thinking too many hateful thoughts about Rowan and Johnny. My folding was fastidious as I prepared each

item, and Kaelyn placed them into whichever trunk they belonged, adding sprigs of lavender as she went.

"He's not worthy of the post," I heard Marilee lament as she entered the bedchamber which was strewn with the items we planned to pack.

"That's not for us to decide," Sir James responded as he came in after her.

"But why him?" she complained, the bright ribbons that adorned her dress fluttering with her anger. "He is not Phillips's equal, and he has no business taking his place."

"I agree, but neither you nor I have any say in the matter. Reeve has been appointed, and we must respect the position he holds."

The princess scoffed. "It is a good thing that we'll be gone for so long, because I don't know that I could abide it," she declared as she stepped into her dressing closet. "He is a horrid, ruthless man, and I cannot think what the high magistrate was thinking when he appointed him."

Sir James settled his shoulder against the doorframe that led from their bedchamber into Marilee's dressing closet. "You know the senior-most constable gets promoted to magistrate."

"Well then, whoever made him constable in the first place is mad," Marilee grumbled.

"It was likely a political maneuver. Or perhaps no one else wanted the post. We've a small village here, and it isn't the most prestigious position."

"I despise politics," Marilee ranted from the depths of her closet.

"You're a member of the royal family," Sir James pointed out, a smile in his voice.

"Exactly," she said, stepping up to where Sir James leaned in the doorway and squaring her shoulders. She likely meant to look tough, but Marilee always came across as soft. "I know what I'm talking about. Anyone who wishes to be in politics shouldn't be."

He placed a hand on her waist. "An excellent point, my dear." He kissed her forehead.

My smile couldn't be suppressed. I would certainly miss the master and lady of the house. And their banter.

Kaelyn and I spent the rest of the day preparing Princess Marilee's trunk while Sir James's valet did the same for him. Jane prepared the children's things with Beatrice's help.

That evening, I worked to straighten the kitchen, encouraging Emeline to go to Cecily's cottage so that they could visit and say their goodbyes. Cecily would be going with Princess Marilee. Falstone, as Her Highness's most trusted guard, was going with her to Dalthia, and where Falstone went, his wife and children went. I knew that before Emeline had Hunter in her life, Cecily had been her lifeline, the sister she'd never had, so I wanted to be sure they had a proper farewell.

The next morning, we all stood out on the front steps, waving the family on their way and wondering what the next months would hold. In addition to Marilee's and Cecily's families being gone, Marilee's lady's maid, her second guard, the children's nurse, and James's valet would be absent as well. It would be a very empty house for the duration of their trip.

As the carriages disappeared down the drive, I heard the housekeeper, Beatrice, let out a hefty sigh before turning to look us over. Each maid, footman, cook, and groom was pinned in turn by her gaze. "I understand that things will be different now. There may be less work, but since our master and mistress have been kind enough to keep us all on staff during their absence, we will not shirk the duties that remain. We will not abuse their hospitality. We will not sully their good name in any way. Is that clear?"

A chorus of "Yes, ma'am" rumbled through our gathered ranks.

"Good," Beatrice said with a satisfied nod. "Off to your duties, then."

I silently fumed, annoyed that neither Rowan nor Johnny was present to hear Beatrice's speech

about not *sullying the good name* of the Sutton household. Rowan and his family worked for the manor but were not part of the house staff. And Johnny worked at Bridgefield, where Beatrice had no jurisdiction. It was a shame that the two who were most likely to cause trouble weren't able to hear the warning they so clearly needed.

I approached the cottage that Rowan shared with his parents and found him sitting on the front step, an antler in one hand, a shard of rock in the other. He was using the antler to chip away at the edges of the rock shard, forming it into an arrowhead.

I was nearly on top of him before he looked up and noticed my approach. He fumbled to set his tool aside and stood. "Miriam," he said with a nod. He had the good sense to look slightly more humble than usual.

I gave him a terse bob of my head but didn't speak.

"Shall we?" he said, gesturing toward the practice range.

We walked together around the back of his cottage and into the trees. "Lovely day," he commented. I ignored him.

"Have you been practicing?" he asked.

"Of course." He knew very well that I did my best to practice two or three times a week, so long as work didn't wear me out too much. He was only asking stupid questions to get me to talk because he knew I was angry with him.

When we reached the archery range that he'd cobbled together over the years, he handed me a quiver. I put the strap over one arm and then my head so that it lay diagonally across my back. I took my stance, and Rowan took a moment to kick my back heel into a better position then gestured for me to proceed. When I hit the target, my pride swelled, and a very small amount of my anger dissipated.

That is until Rowan opened his mouth.

"So, are you going to ask about it?"

I cut my eyes over to him, ignoring how charming his smile was, and then I focused again on the target as I drew an arrow from my quiver. "About what?" I questioned, feigning ignorance.

"You know what."

"No, I'm not going to ask, because as I told you, I don't want to know," I bit out as I nocked another arrow.

"So you'll just condemn us without knowing the facts?"

"The facts?" I shouted, whirling so I could look at him, the arrow still nocked, but pointed at the ground in front of me. "The facts are that you and Johnny stole. You took something—not a small something, but an entire purse of money that did not belong to you. Those are the facts." I turned back to the target, raised my bow, drew back, and shot.

I missed. My skills were always rubbish when I was angry. I'd completely missed my anchor point, drawing to my neck instead of the corner of my mouth.

"I'm sure it's easy to judge from where you are. You've never had to beg for what you needed."

I sucked in a breath and slowly turned to face him, feeling as if he had slapped me. "And you know this how?"

He scoffed. "All I have to do is look at you."

Deep hurt and resentment clawed at my insides. "One look and you know everything about me?" I

worked to keep my voice calm, but inside I was boiling. He knew *nothing* about me. He didn't know about the nights I'd spent alone in the wagon, waiting for Father and Hunter to come back from one of their jobs. He didn't know how many times I'd gone to take a bite of dinner only to have it taken from my hands because I hadn't brought home enough coins that day. He didn't know that Hunter had always saved a little of his food to be sure I didn't go hungry if the old man was being especially mean. He didn't understand how frightening it had been when Hunter and I had been forced to find employment at different houses or the terror of being thrown out of the house where I worked when I was too ill to tend to my duties.

"I know you've had a brother to take care of you your whole life," he said with a cocky tilt of his jaw. But his gaze wasn't quite steady.

"And that makes my life charmed?"

"If you'd ever been on the other side of things, you'd know the answer to that. Some people have no one."

He was right, of course—not about me and my charmed life; that idea was laughable. But I knew how lucky I was to have Hunter. It was why I respected my brother so much. It was why I wanted to make him proud. Still, having Rowan lecture me about having a hard life was not something I could countenance. I narrowed my eyes at him. "And *you* know what that's like?" I sneered. "*You*, who still have a father *and* a mother?" I demanded, my voice rising. "Please, tell me how *you* know so much about being utterly alone."

A shadow crossed his face, but it was gone before I could figure out what it meant. "You're right. I don't," he admitted. "But I see those who are. And I'm trying to help them."

"By being a thief?"

"If that's what it takes," he said, defiant.

"That makes no sense." I turned away from him, knowing our argument would go nowhere. I nocked an arrow and pulled back. "How's my form?" I asked.

"Miriam—" he started to protest.

I cut him off. "I came here to learn archery. That's all. Teach me that."

"The magistrate is corrupt."

I scoffed, focusing on my aim. "Everyone in power is corrupt."

"Does everyone have a group of constables who go around stealing from the vendors at market?"

I froze for so long that my arm started to shake with the strain of keeping my arrow pulled back. Finally I released it but didn't wait to see if it hit the mark. Instead I turned back to Rowan. "What?"

"The lawmen are stealing from the villagers." His words were slow and deliberate.

I didn't respond. I hadn't heard of such things happening.

He took a step toward me. "Should we just accept our lot in life when our own magistrate and his constables start showing up at people's homes, demanding payment of taxes that have already been paid?"

I blinked. "That can't be true," I insisted. Surely I would have heard if things like that were happening.

"It is true," he affirmed, his voice perfectly level.

"Well then, why isn't someone doing something about it?"

"I am!"

I scoffed. "I'm not talking about thieving little boys."

He glared at the description.

"I'm talking about someone writing to the duke or going to the capital to speak with the high

magistrate. Why isn't someone doing that?"

He looked at me like I was daft. "What commoner do you know who would be able to do that? What commoner would have the time, means, and ability to carry out such a lofty task?"

All right, he may have had a point. But still... "What about the butler or housekeeper who work at Bridgefield?" I demanded. "They work for the duke! Surely they could get word to him."

"Good luck convincing them. And in the meantime, I'll do what I can." He gave an arrogant shrug. "And what if those you help end up being blamed for your crimes?" I challenged. "What then?"

He started to speak, but words seemed to fail him.

I raised my brows, waiting for him to come up with an answer, but none came. "That's what I thought. Actions have consequences, Rowan. I suggest you think them all the way through before you go flaunting the law."

He took a step forward. "And what happens if I do nothing? What happens if no one stands up?" He paused, but I couldn't come up with an answer, so he just nodded. "Inaction has consequences as well."

I didn't know what else to say. If what he was saying was true...

He gestured toward the target. "Aim. You came here to learn archery."

My chin pulled in. I didn't like that he was the one acting angry, but I couldn't say for certain that his anger with me was unjustified, not when I knew so little. Not when I didn't really want to know any more. I didn't want to believe that this place could be corrupted and turned into a battleground between the law and the common man. But that's what he was suggesting.

I placed my basket on Wick's tabletop with a thunk. "I need more arrows."

He gave me a sidelong glance. "You really should learn how to make your own."

"I'm sure I'll get around to it sometime, but until then, I'm positive that yours are better."

A corner of his mouth turned up. "How's the bow treating you?"

I grinned. "Wonderfully. I knew I'd chosen the right one."

"You certainly took long enough to decide."

"Not true," I corrected. "I knew from the start which one I wanted; I just couldn't afford it at the time."

"And how many arrows can you afford now?"

I shrugged. "Only two."

Wick sighed. "As much as I appreciate the business, I don't feel good about you spending all your money on my arrows."

"I've got an older brother already, Wick. I do not need another," I reminded him as I selected the two arrows I wished to purchase.

He gave a little chuckle. "Very well, Miss Miriam." He looked past me for a moment, and his smile fled. Instead of the kind and accommodating grin I was used to, his expression morphed into worry and then quickly hardened into anger.

"Is everything all right?" I asked as I held out a copper.

His attention returned to me and he took the money before quickly helping me tuck the arrows amid the other wares in my basket. "You'd best be on your way," he urged.

"Why? What's wrong?" I asked, turning to look deeper into the market, wondering what had changed his demeanor so swiftly.

"The constable is coming."

My brow furrowed and I looked back at him. "Have I done something illegal that I don't know

about?"

He gave a swift shake of his head. "Lately, the constables don't come to the market to keep the peace."

Rowan's words about corruption rang in my head, and my heart sank. "They don't?" I asked, trying to see past the crowd of people.

"No, they don't." He shoved my basket into my arms and practically pushed me from the stall. "Now go."

I did as he asked but only went so far as to tuck myself out of sight before turning back to look around the market. I spotted the constable without difficulty. He was in his uniform, and I noted that the vendors closest to him were all trying hard to look busy and never made eye contact with him. He fingered a few items at Selworth's stand before taking a large handful of nuts from one of the baskets and sticking them in his pocket with a broad grin.

He walked away without paying, and I could see the way Selworth held himself rigid, angry but determined not to make a scene.

My face went slack, dismayed at what I was witnessing.

"What's this?"

I spun at the sound of the voice, and my heart dropped when I realized it was another constable standing just behind me.

He hands rested on his hips as he looked me up and down. "You look like you're up to no good." The words were disapproving but he was grinning, like he was happy he'd found someone to interrogate.

"I'm just waiting for a friend," I lied easily.

"Is that right?" He leaned closer to look in my basket, pulling one of my arrows free and twirling it in his hands. "This is a fine piece."

"I know," I said, keeping my voice steady and upbeat. "That's why I purchased it." I looked back behind me. "I see my friend, so I must be going now." I held my hand out, trying to act as though there was no doubt that he would return the arrow to me, even though inside, I felt my chances were quite dim.

My hand remained hovering between us as he twirled the arrow once more. "What household do you work in, girl?"

"Sutton. I work for Sir James and Princess Marilee."

The arrow stopped twirling. "Do you now?"

I gave a bright smile. "Yes. Are you familiar with the gentleman and lady of the house?"

His eyes narrowed. "Only by reputation." He abruptly set the arrow on my palm then nodded toward the other end of the market. "Off with you."

I didn't need telling twice. I tucked the arrow next to the other one and set off at a brisk pace. Perhaps he'd never meant to take anything from me. Maybe he'd truly been admiring the arrow. But for what purpose? Objectively, the interaction had been entirely innocuous. But it didn't *feel* that way. It felt like he'd intended to take the arrow for himself, but would a constable truly take something right out of a commoner's basket? In broad daylight?

Audacious wasn't a strong enough word for such behavior.

I shook my head and walked swiftly toward the road that would take me to Sutton Manor.

When I reached the turnoff to Bridgefield, I paused. I wanted to tell someone what I'd seen. Normally I would have run to Hunter, but ever since he'd married, I had tried to give him a little bit of space. He'd taken care of me for long enough. Now I wanted him to live his own life and focus on

building a family.

My feet turned to head toward Bridgefield, but then I stopped, turning back to the road—only to stop again. I needed someone to listen to me. Johnny worked at Bridgefield, and he would listen. I hoped. He and I hadn't really spoken since I'd returned the pouch to him and Rowan, but he'd been one of the first to call himself my friend when I'd come to work at Sutton, so despite our present argument, I knew he would listen to me.

Bridgefield was a sort of summer home for the ducal family. The house and its workings were a bit of a mystery to me. The servants kept it in good working order, and yet despite it being a supposed summer getaway, I'd never once heard of the duke's family actually coming to stay in the year I'd lived at Sutton.

As I walked down the drive, I couldn't help but gaze up at the imposing structure with its dark stone and high towers. I'd actually stayed inside Bridgefield once. It had only been for a few days. I'd been twelve years old and so sick that I'd barely made it to the back door where Emeline had found me. Hunter had been working at Bridgefield, and he'd had to hide me away and sneak food to me until we were able to find a position elsewhere for both of us. I remembered almost nothing about those days, lying feverish in Hunter's room while he cared for me and slept on the floor.

Hunter had always taken care of me, and I was doing my best to prove that I could take care of myself so that he no longer had to worry.

As I circled Bridgefield, I found Johnny's younger sister, Gretchen, hanging laundry, her face tense as though deep in thought.

"Hello, Gretchen," I called.

Her gaze jerked in my direction, and it took a moment for her expression to relax, but eventually she smiled. "Morning, Miriam."

"Do you know where Johnny is?"

"He's round back, though I don't know why you're chasing after him when you've got Rowan."

I choked a bit. "What?" I asked in shock. "I don't have Rowan, and I'm not chasing after Johnny."

She grinned. *Cheeky twelve-year-old*. "I know. Still, you could do worse than Rowan. He's a charmer, he is."

I narrowed my eyes playfully. "Aren't you a bit young to be noticing a man's charms?"

She gave an unconcerned shrug. "Good-looking is good-looking. You must have noticed after training with him."

I chuckled. "Have you noticed Ansel's charms? You've trained plenty with him."

My question elicited the desired response. She scrunched up her face in disgust as she pulled a piece of clothing from the basket at her feet. "Ansel is like a brother."

"Speaking of brothers, where did you say Johnny was?"

She looked over her left shoulder and lifted her chin in that direction. "He's working on the shrubbery along the back of the house."

"Thanks."

I continued on to the back of the house and located Johnny easily by following the sound of his swearing. He was lying on his stomach, his top half obscured by the shrub he'd crawled under. I walked right up to him and dropped my basket on the ground. He gave a startled yelp and yanked himself upright and out of the hole he'd dug beneath the bush. I looked at the hole compared to the size of him, surprised he'd fit.

"Miri," he said, panting as he wiped the sweat from his eyes. "What are you doing here?"

I stood over him with my hands on my hips, still upset with him for involving me in his thieving—

for even thieving in the first place—but needing to share my concerns.

He gave me a wry smile. "If you're going to yell at me, you'd best get on with it. I've got another fight waiting for me," he said, nodding toward the shrub.

I didn't know how the shrub had offended him nor did I care, but his invitation to yell at him took a bit of the bluster out of me, and I sank to the ground with a heavy sigh as I tried to decide where to start.

He must have seen my uneasiness, because his expression softened. "What is it, Miri?"

"I was at market," I said, fingering the basket beside me.

"Ah," he replied as though the four words I'd spoken explained everything. "And what did you see?"

I glared at him, not appreciating the *I-told-you-so* expression on his face. "It was only a handful of nuts," I said.

His eyebrow lifted.

"The constable. He only took a handful of nuts."

"That you saw."

"Yes."

He let the silence sit between us for a few moments before asking, "What are the chances he stole more?"

I didn't respond. The chances were high. I looked around, hating that I was having this conversation, hating that there was good reason for it. A movement at the corner of my eye caught my attention. Tyson was walking toward us, so I mustered a smile for him. He was a couple years younger than both Johnny and me, but he was part of the group that trained regularly with Falstone, so I'd come to know him.

"Oh good," Johnny griped. "Someone else to disrupt my work."

Tyson gave Johnny an annoyed raise of his brow then looked back at me. "What's gotten into him?" "Nothing," I said.

"Liar," Johnny muttered.

I climbed to my feet. "I'll let you get back to work."

"Wait." Tyson looked confused, maybe even a little concerned. "What's going on?"

"Nothing," I said.

At the same time, Johnny blurted out, "She saw one of the constables steal, but she's doing her best not to believe her own eyes."

"That's not what I said," I defended. "I don't know what to think, Johnny. I don't want to believe the worst of people."

I watched as Tyson and Johnny exchanged weighted looks, like they were confiding without words, and suddenly I realized that Tyson must already know. "He knows?" I asked Johnny as I tilted my head toward Tyson.

"He's helping."

I growled, hating that he and Rowan had pulled Tyson into their schemes. "If *helping* is what you call it. Have you turned Oliver into a thief as well?" Were all of Falstone's trainees going to become outlaws?

"You just said you don't want to believe the worst of people," Johnny threw at me.

"I don't."

"But you were more than ready to believe that Rowan and I were stealing just for the fun of it—or to line our own pockets."

"You'd stolen a pouch of money," I argued.

"To give back to the people who are being bled dry by the law."

My chin pulled back as I let that sink in. "That's what you're doing?" Why hadn't Rowan just said that?

"Of course that's what we're doing," he said, raising his hands in exasperation.

"Then why didn't you tell me that in the first place?" I asked, agitated.

He narrowed his eyes at me. "You threatened to hold the money hostage if I said anything more about it," he reminded me.

He was right. I had. I grabbed my basket. "I have work to do." I walked away from them both, feeling worse than I had when I'd come to Johnny for understanding. I'd been hoping he would somehow lessen my fears and anxiety, but now they were worse. I wasn't usually one to ignore my own eyes, but I didn't know what to believe, and I didn't want to jump to the worst conclusion when there might be a more reasonable explanation.

I sighed, frustrated to realize I'd done exactly that with Johnny and Rowan. Still. Just because they had a reason didn't make it right.

"Miriam, wait," Johnny said as he caught my arm, making me turn to face him.

"I can't be a part of this, Johnny. Maybe what you're doing isn't so bad," I conceded, more confused than ever. "Maybe, but I can't be part of it."

I had moved beyond that life. I'd pried myself from it with Hunter's help, and I could not go back.

The sun was slanting behind the trees as I nocked one of my new arrows. I drew back, my thumb hitting the corner of my mouth as I consciously reminded myself to relax, drop my shoulders, exhale, release. It flew well.

"Not bad."

Rowan's voice undid all my efforts to relax. I turned to find him standing five paces behind me and to my left, getting ready to nock his own arrow.

Curse Gretchen and her suggestion. He was good-looking, and the way my stomach seemed to take careful notice of that fact was not helpful.

He drew his arrow back.

"You've dragged Tyson into it?" I asked, my voice harsher than I intended.

He missed the target.

I blinked in surprise, realizing this was the first time I'd ever seen him miss. I stared at the arrow where it stuck out of the ground, completely shocked. Rowan *never* missed.

When I finally turned to look at him, his jaw was tense and he was glaring at the arrow. Then he slowly turned his glare on me.

I couldn't help it—I laughed. It was just a small burst of air that broke from my lips, then I smacked my hand over my mouth.

His glare intensified as he lowered his bow.

My laughter slipped past my hand, coming out in a sputter.

"What in the world is so funny?" he asked in a bored monotone.

I swallowed my laughter, fighting for composure, and gave a little shrug. "It's just nice to see you fail once in a while."

He raised a brow, looking more confused than angry now. "I'm fairly certain I should be hurt by such a sentiment."

My mirth faded as I recalled my anger, though somehow it was less now. I let out a heavy sigh.

"How many of the boys have you got helping you?" I asked.

"They aren't children."

I closed my eyes, hating the thought of those boys being turned into thieves. They didn't understand the toll a life of dishonesty could have on a person. "They're my friends as much as they're yours, and I'm concerned."

He studied me, confusion lining his face. "But not angry?"

"Should I be angry?" I asked in frustration. "Because honestly, I can't decide. Looking at the basic facts leaves me furious, because I do not believe that anything should justify outright thievery. But Johnny tells me you're helping people, and I saw for myself the way that the constables were abusing their power."

His brow furrowed in concern. "What happened?" His worried eyes raked over me from head to toe.

It was strange to see him suddenly so protective, and it took me a moment to gather up my thoughts again. "All I saw was one of the constables take a handful of nuts, then another one commented on how fine my arrows were."

His eyes narrowed. "Commented?"

"It was..." I thought back on the encounter. "I don't know. For a moment it seemed like he was going to take one, but then he asked what house I worked for. After I told him, his demeanor changed and he gave it back."

He dragged a hand down his face. "So in all likelihood, if you didn't work for a powerful and well-respected family, he would have taken that arrow right out of your hand and kept it."

I wanted to claim it wasn't as bad as that, but my intuition whispered that he was right. I shrugged one shoulder. "Maybe" was all the concession I was willing to give.

He turned away, his hands flexing at his sides before turning back. "What exactly do you expect people to do when the lawmen are the ones breaking the law?"

How I wished I had the answer, but all I could do was stand there with everything that I thought I knew tied up in knots and shake my head. "I don't have an answer for that."

He looked at me, his eyes intense, his jaw working from side to side. "Well, I think I do. So unless you come up with a better way to handle things, I'm going to continue to help in my own way."

He took a slow step back, his eyes raking over me one more time, then turned to walk away.

Worry and fear swelled uncomfortably in my chest. "Just—" I called after him, and he paused. "Just don't drag the others down with you. Please."

He hung his head then turned to face me, holding his hands out at his sides. "I'm just doing what I think is right. Anyone who chooses to help me does so of their own volition." He walked away, leaving me standing there, frustrated that he hadn't budged at all. And even more frustrated that a part of me agreed with him.

I walked along the path that led to the Lockleys' cottage, a basket propped on my hip. It was time to replenish the herb stores that were used for healing up at the manor house. I hoped that Rowan would have the herbs ready and waiting for me so that I could take them and be on my way without having to deal with my tangled thoughts about how he was stealing money in order to return it. And if I could avoid his charm that annoyed and excited me at the same time, that was all the better.

As I approached his door, I called out a hello in case he was working out in the yard as he was wont to do at this time of day. There was no response, so I knocked sharply on the door.

There was no response to that either. Odd. Rowan shared the cottage with both of his parents. At least one of them should have been at home. Perplexed, I hitched my basket up on my hip and headed around to the back of the house, where the herb garden spread out in tidy rows. Rowan was there, standing amid the rows of plants, his eyes glazed as he rested heavily on the shovel in his hands.

"Rowan?" I called as I approached.

It took him several seconds to look up and even longer for his eyes to focus on me.

"Miriam," he said in a weak imitation of his usual voice.

I set the basket down and hurried to his side. "Rowan?" I asked, concerned by his pallor. His eyes fixed on me for just a moment, and I saw they were feverish. There was no sweat on his brow, though it was a warm day, and his breath was labored with exertion. "You are ill," I concluded. "You need to go in and rest."

He cast his eyes about him, though I wasn't sure he truly saw anything. "Not done..."

"You've done enough," I insisted as I gently pried the shovel handle from his grip. As soon as I did, though, he lurched to the side as if that had been the only thing holding him up.

Alarm shot through me as I reached out to try to steady him. He was not overly broad, but he was tall enough that I would be of little help if he collapsed.

Fortunately, he managed to right himself with my assistance, and I pulled his arm over my shoulders, helping him through the garden and around to his door. With each step, he seemed to lean on me more and more heavily, and by the time I pushed his door open, I feared we were in danger of crumpling to the ground. It was by sheer force of will that I maneuvered him the last several feet and heaved him onto the smaller of the two mattresses in the two-room dwelling.

His eyes were glazed and drifting shut. "Rowan?" I was out of breath. "Rowan Lockley," I said again, patting his face in an attempt to get him to focus. "How long have you been ill?"

"Not ill," he mumbled.

I blew out a breath. "You are most assuredly ill." The temperature of his face under my hands attested to that.

His eyes were already closed, though, and I very much hoped he was simply sleeping and not entirely unconscious. I straightened and rested my hands on my hips, wondering what to do next. I couldn't just leave him, but I also didn't want to impose where I didn't belong.

Still, I knew what it was like to be laid low with sickness. I'd dealt with a lingering sickness for

nearly a year when I was younger. It had left me unable to work, and I'd had no choice but to go to my brother when my employer turned me out. Hunter had cared for me. That's what sick people needed, to be cared for.

I gave one firm nod of my head. Perhaps Rowan wouldn't want my help, but he needed it, so I did my best to move him into a more comfortable position before going to fetch a bowl of water and a cloth. I would have to do what I could for him until his mother returned. I perched on the side of his bed and bathed his face and chest with the cool water, hoping that it would bring him some relief.

Up until that point, I had been able to be objective, looking at the situation and deciding what needed to be done. But as I sat there beside him, running the cloth over his forehead and down his neck, the intimacy of the situation sank in. Outside of my own family, I'd never cared for a man in this way. And I couldn't keep caring for him now. I had to return to the manor house with the required herbs.

He continued to sleep, though he did so fitfully. I set the bowl of water aside and opened the shutters that covered the window so that a breeze could come in and continue to cool him, then I reluctantly went in search of my basket. I found a collection of bundled herbs that I believed were meant for me to take and loaded them into my basket before leaving. I would take these back to the house and then ask Beatrice what should be done.

I made the walk back to the manor more quickly than ever before, stopping at the stables when I saw Hunter saddling a horse. "Do you know where Mr. and Mrs. Lockley are?" I asked without preamble.

His brow furrowed. "Mr. Lockley is likely checking his traps or setting new ones. I couldn't say where Mrs. Lockley would be. Is something wrong?"

"Rowan seems to be ill," I answered even as I moved away. "I'm going to find Beatrice."

Reaching the kitchen, I delivered the herbs to the still room and went in search of the housekeeper.

I followed the sound of her voice down the corridor and realized she was in the sitting room, reprimanding a maid she'd found lazing about.

I waited outside the door, out of sight, trying to be patient. It had been so strange to see Rowan that way, devoid of strength and swagger. My heart had hurt for him, and I had the strangest urge to run back to his cottage just to be sure that he was not alone. Being alone had been the thing I hated most when I was sick.

Finally Beatrice finished her conversation, and I straightened when I heard her coming toward the door.

She stopped at the sight of me, no doubt startled by my abrupt presence. "Miriam," she said. "Were you looking for me?"

"Yes, ma'am. Rowan Lockley is ill. I barely got him into the house before his strength gave out. I believe he is out of his head with fever."

"Oh dear." She moved down the corridor, and I fell into step beside her. "I will send someone to look for Mrs. Lockley. She'll be the best thing for him, but I sent her into the village to consult with the apothecary about some herbs that we have not been able to grow here."

I followed after her, an urgent need to return and help compelling me to speak up. "If I may, ma'am. I would like to return and do what I can for him while we wait for her return."

She paused just long enough to look at me, and I did my best to hide the odd tangle of emotions rolling through my body. She gave a sharp nod. "Very well. I will feel easier knowing that someone is watching out for him."

"Thank you, ma'am." I did a vague imitation of a curtsey before scuttling off to the kitchen to gather

some foodstuffs to take with me. There was a hearty soup bubbling over the fire that Emeline was making to feed the servants. I put some in a lidded crock and wrapped it in a towel.

My walk back to the Lockleys' house was much slower, as I had to be certain that the bowl of soup I had pilfered did not spill. This gave me time to doubt my decision to insert myself into Rowan's life. Yes, he was sick and he needed help, but perhaps he was not so bad off as I had thought. I would hate for him to think I was looking for an excuse to attend his bedside. Yes, I was drawn to Rowan, but I knew I shouldn't be, and more importantly, I didn't *want* to be.

But it was too late now. I would at least go and deliver this soup. A man needed to eat, especially a sick man.

When I reached Rowan's home, I knocked, just in case he was coherent enough to answer.

The house remained silent. I let myself in. My eyes immediately fixated on the large body sprawled out across the bed. It appeared as though he hadn't moved since I had left. I hoped that was simply because he was resting well, but I had my doubts. I set the soup on the small table and crossed to the bed, resting the back of my fingers against his forehead. The heat radiating from his skin was frightening, so before attempting to get any soup into him, I took up the old bowl of water and brought it out to the rain barrel to refill it. Returning to his side, I soaked the scrap of cloth in the water and then ran it over his reddened face and squeezed some into his golden-blond hair.

I turned to the bowl, rinsing the cloth once more, but jumped as I felt a hand on my waist. I looked down to see Rowan's arm winding around me.

"Isabel, come back to bed," he said, his eyes fluttering but not opening all the way.

I froze. Isabel? Who was Isabel? I didn't know any servants by that name. And *come back to bed*?? That was not something you said to a girl you were courting; it was something you said to a *wife*.

Come back to bed? Was he married? He couldn't be. He lived here with his parents.

I was forced from my thoughts when he tried to pull me down beside him. I braced against the pull. "Rowan?" I tried to loosen his grasp. "Rowan!" I said his name sharply, trying to jar him to his senses. "You are ill. I am only trying to help."

"My head hurts, Bel." His speech was slurred, but his grip was firm. "Just rest with me. I miss you." His breath stuttered as a tear slipped from his red-rimmed eyes. "I always miss you."

I was so startled by his emotion, by the utter anguish that saturated his voice, that I stopped resisting and found myself lying on the bed with my back to him, unsure what to do next.

He draped an arm over my waist and sighed the words, "Thank you, Bel" against the back of my neck before losing consciousness again—or falling asleep. I couldn't tell which.

I lay there, stunned into stillness by the comforting weight of his arm and the heat of his chest against my back. There had been a deep-seated sorrow in his words that suggested his loss was more than just a temporary separation. Was Rowan perhaps...a widower? At such a young age? I wasn't quite eighteen, and Rowan was only a handful of years older than I was. If Isabel was his wife, they would have been married young. She would have died young.

How horribly tragic.

Unable to resist, I turned over so that I could face him. He didn't stir. As I studied his face, I could see a single tear still clinging to his pale cheek. I reached up and ran my fingers through his hair, desperate to comfort him and not knowing how. I pressed my forehead to his, taking one deep breath before pulling away and sitting up. I carefully removed his hand from my waist, and it remained limp as I laid it on the mattress beside him. He seemed calmer now, as if the memory of this Isabel—no matter how painful—had somehow allowed him to rest.

I turned my face away, my chest aching with the tragic scenarios I couldn't help but conjure. I

would have to ask him about her, find out the truth. I had heard nothing about an Isabel in all my months of working here, so either people refused to speak of her or it was a secret he guarded so closely that most didn't know.

How would he feel when he realized he'd revealed that secret to me?

I didn't stay much longer. I couldn't. The idea that this young man held such grief nearly undid me, especially as I tended to him in his weakened state. I stepped outside, needing space from the tragedy but unwilling to leave him alone. I stood at the edge of the garden that I knew he helped tend with his mother, deep in thought. Everything that I knew about Rowan seemed to shift and warp, taking on a different shape and color.

"Is that you, Miriam?"

I looked up at the sound of Mrs. Lockley's voice. "Hello, Anne."

"Did you get the herbs I left out for you?"

"Yes, but when I came..." It took me a moment to order my thoughts. "Rowan seems very ill. He's feverish."

She looked toward the house. "Oh dear. He mentioned feeling a bit off, but he assured me he'd be fine. Stubborn lad." She hurried toward the cottage. "Thank you for looking after him, Miriam."

"You're welcome, and I left some soup on the table," I said as she slipped inside.

Well. That was that. Rowan no longer needed me and I was free to go. So then why did I hesitate? Why did it feel wrong to leave him? Was it because I now carried the weight of what I knew? Or was it simply that I knew what it was like to be so ill, and I wanted to help if I could?

I walked away from their cottage, telling myself firmly that it didn't matter. I'd do well to forget Rowan's delirious ramblings and continue with life as usual.

That night, I sat on my bed in my chemise, brushing through my red curls as I stared out the window. I could see the moon, nearly full, rising above the horizon. And though it was a beautiful sight, it couldn't hold my attention. I was too distracted by the memory of a sad Rowan pulling me to his chest, missing a woman I hadn't known existed before today.

Nellie walked into the room, untying her apron to hang it on one of the hooks that lined our wall. She gave me a smile when she caught my eye but didn't say anything.

"Are you enjoying the extra free time?" I asked her.

She smiled. "It's different, certainly," she answered as she unhooked the back of her skirt.

"It is," I agreed, then couldn't hold my dilemma inside anymore. "Nellie, can I tell you something?" "Course you can."

"I know something. Or, I found out something. But the person who said it didn't intend for me to know. I sort of...overheard them speaking about something."

"Was it a bad something?" she asked as she stepped out of her skirt and petticoat.

"No," I assured her. "Not bad or dangerous, just...personal. I don't believe this person would want me to know. But I didn't mean to overhear, it just happened."

"How personal was it?"

"Very personal," I answered as I thought of the way his arm had curled around me, pulling me down beside him. "And sad. And surprising."

"Surprising how?"

I pinched the ends of my fingers as I thought. "I didn't expect this person to have that kind of secret."

"A sad secret?"

I nodded.

"Why not?"

Why not? I suppose because Rowan seemed so carefree. I'd never thought of him as someone who had suffered. Clearly I'd been wrong.

"What's your question?" Nellie asked, sitting down on her own bed.

I hardly knew. I just didn't want to make a bungle of things. "What do I do? Should I tell him that I know?"

She tilted her head, giving me a knowing look. "I think you know the answer to that."

I groaned and lay back on my bed. "I know," I lamented. "I have to tell him that I know. It will just be so strange." I lay there in silence, worrying for several moments before I admitted, "I don't want him to hate me." I wasn't even certain why that was a fear. But my knowledge felt like a violation, like I had betrayed his trust by figuring out his secret. However, I knew that the real betrayal would be not telling him that I knew.

"I can't imagine that anyone would hate you for accidentally knowing about something. Especially if you're honest about it."

I nodded. "You're right." At least I hoped she was right.

I crawled under my covers knowing that my next conversation with Rowan was going to be unavoidably and inevitably awkward.

My weekly trip to the village market was much the same as the week before. The constables' presence made everyone tense, and I saw at least one of the lawmen pocket a trinket from Miss Garnet's booth. She, in turn, grabbed his wrist, not to try to reacquire the stolen item but to give him a dramatic and bleak warning. The constable just grinned and went on his way. Garnet muttered a lengthy string of words as the man left. I assumed it was a curse and hoped it worked.

Fortunately, I did my shopping without incident, though part of me was disappointed that I hadn't seen the constables do anything blatantly and grotesquely illegal. Stealing a few nuts and a bauble wasn't good, but they were just trivial enough that they didn't seem worth retaliation. If I could just say for certain that they were knowingly stealing things of consequence, perhaps I could allow myself to be on Rowan and Johnny's side. Not that I could ever help them. Hunter would be horrified if I ever went back to thieving. I would be horrified.

As I left the market, I went up the lane until I reached High Street, where most of the shops were situated. Since Rowan was still unwell, his mother had sent me with a large packet of herbs to sell to the apothecary.

I passed by the bake house, the cobbler, and the carpenter before pushing my way through the door of the apothecary shop. I was immediately assaulted by the pungent smell of herbs and concoctions saturating the air.

The apothecary appeared from the back room and gave me a smile, his sporadic tufts of white hair fluttering as he moved. "What can I do you for, miss?" he asked.

I set my basket on the ground and pulled the packet from its depths. "I'm here on behalf of Anne Lockley. She was indisposed and asked me to deliver these."

"Ah," he said, taking the packet and opening it carefully. "Let's see what we have here." He carefully looked through each item. Some were simply bundles of stalks, gathered and tied. Others were tiny packets with seeds inside. When he had finished his perusal, he offered me a price that fit within the range that Anne had told me was acceptable.

After putting the coins away, I bent to retrieve my basket but paused. "Might I ask you something?" "Of course," he said absentmindedly as he sorted through his new merchandise.

"Have you noticed any trouble happening down at the market?"

He nodded. "I've heard word from more than a few people. Seems there's been more thefts than usual. The constables don't know what to make of it."

I pinched my mouth shut, determined not to make any comment on the constables. "Have you had any troubles here in the High Street?" Were the lawmen only targeting the lowest class?

He shook his head. "I haven't heard of anything unusual in the shops. Of course, Magistrate Reeve checks in on us. He comes from High Street. Spent years working the masonry before he trained up as a constable." There was clear pride in the man's eyes. He seemed to consider Reeve one of his own and was glad to see him rise in position and authority.

My stomach sank a little. "Well," I managed to say past my concern. "Thank you for your time."

My return to Sutton Manor was filled with speculation. What if the magistrate and his men ended up pitting the shopkeepers of High Street against the farmers and merchants who came to sell their goods only on market day? If the lawmen took care of the shopkeepers while keeping the market vendors under their boot...it would tear the village apart.

It was five days after Rowan had fallen ill before I saw him out in the yard with the others.

Apparently he was back on his feet, and that meant our weekly lesson could move forward. Part of me wanted to delay our lesson further in the hopes that I would start to feel less guilty about my secret knowledge. I hadn't asked anyone else if they knew an Isabel. I hadn't asked for further information about Rowan. It wasn't my place, which was why I desperately wished that I hadn't inadvertently eavesdropped on his fevered ramblings. But I had, and now I knew things, and avoiding Rowan wasn't going to make the situation any better.

So I walked to his home, clutching my bow like a lifeline.

I found him in the herb garden, kneeling in the dirt. "Come for another torture session, have you?" Rowan teased when he saw me coming toward him.

"Only if you have time now." A large part of me hoped he would turn me away.

He got up and dusted his knees off. "I can always make time for shooting." He grinned.

It was so strange to see him this way, with his usual carefree manner. The image of him lying helpless on his bed, missing his Isabel, had been so ingrained in my mind that seeing him grinning and teasing was jarring.

"Come," he said, tipping his head toward the woods where his archery range was situated.

When we reached the spot from which we usually shot, he handed me a quiver. "Let's see what you can do." It was his usual way of starting our lessons. See where I was so that he knew where to go next.

I cleared my mind, adjusting my stance and then carefully raising my bow, drawing the arrow back until my thumb rested at the corner of my mouth. Then I breathed out, making sure my bow held steady before letting go.

The arrow landed in the second ring, and I was proud of it.

"Good start," he said, then came closer. "But your arrow tip is still dipping just before you release."

I nodded and nocked another arrow, making sure to stand totally still until the arrow had thunked into the target before breaking my stance. It still hit the second ring, but to the right of the center instead of below.

"Good. Faster," was all Rowan said.

I did as instructed, trying to move quickly while keeping my precision. I hit the third ring.

"Not quite what we were hoping for," Rowan said as he stepped up right behind me. "Draw another."

I nocked and drew back yet another arrow. Rowan reached around my side, pushing up just slightly on the underside of my left forearm. I released my grip before I was ready and the arrow flew wide.

I gave an awkward chuckle, not knowing how else to respond.

Rowan stepped forward so that he could face me, his eyes narrowed in confusion. "What's going on with you?"

"I'm trying to learn something," I replied, attempting to shake off my nerves.

"But you're acting strange," he said, studying my face. "You're not pushing back at all, and you haven't tried to argue with me over how I'm dealing with our corrupt lawmen."

I grimaced. He was right. I didn't usually acquiesce and follow his demands so easily. He'd fallen into the habit of crowding me, and I usually responded by flipping my mass of curly hair into his face or throwing an elbow into his stomach. It was how I'd decided to combat the attraction I felt for him.

But now I knew he was more than just an arrogant flirt. I knew that he was a widower who longed for his wife, and I didn't know what to do with myself. I looked at him, at his confusion, and I couldn't stand it anymore.

"Did you know," I started slowly, "that I helped you when you were ill?" My voice quivered with nerves.

"Yes," he said confused by the change in topic. "I suppose I never thanked you for that. I have only a vague recollection of you helping me into the house. I do appreciate you getting me inside."

I looked down, clearing my throat and gathering my courage. "I stayed for a while. Tried to get your fever down."

"Oh." He seemed embarrassed by that. "That was very kind of you."

It was odd, hearing him give me a sincere compliment, especially one that was outside the realm of archery. But I hadn't been fishing for thanks. No, I had to broach a much more difficult subject. "You were a bit delirious."

A strained half-smile bent his lip. "I hope I didn't say anything inappropriate."

I shook my head. "Not inappropriate, just...surprising."

Worry knit his brows together, and he leaned away from me. "What exactly did I say?"

I wrapped myself in bravery and asked, "Rowan, were you married?"

The change in his demeanor was profound. His face drained of color and he took a stumbling step back. His eyes cast about as if trying to find something to focus on, something that would force this moment to make sense. Finally, after countless emotions chased themselves across his face, his eyes settled on me. Still, it was several heartbeats before he spoke, his voice hoarse. "What did I say when I was ill?"

A sad smile pulled at my mouth. "You thought I was Isabel."

His eyes closed at the mention of her name. "And what gave you the idea that Isabel was my wife?" I took a shallow breath, pushing aside my embarrassment. He deserved to know. "You said, 'Come back to bed."

He grimaced.

I lifted one shoulder. "It's the sort of thing I could only imagine saying to a spouse."

He stared at the ground as his head nodded slowly. Then a wistful smile pulled at his mouth. "She was always remembering one more thing she had to do. We'd be settled, ready to sleep, and she'd hop up, determined to find something or put something away." One short chuckle escaped him, though it might have been a remnant of a sob. I couldn't tell. "I was always telling her to come back to bed." He scrubbed his hand over his face. After blinking up at the sky several times, he turned back to me. "So, now you know."

I did, and I felt awful about it. It was the sort of thing he should have had the chance to share on his own terms. Ambushing him with it didn't feel right, but acting like I didn't know felt decidedly wrong. "You must have been married very young."

Another little chuckle. It was fascinating seeing these memories bombarding him. They were clearly happy memories but wrapped in so much sadness and grief that the full joy of the remembrance couldn't come through. "We were both seventeen. We'd been sweethearts for years and such good friends that my parents didn't see the point in trying to keep us apart once we'd decided marriage was inevitable."

I didn't want to pry, but I was curious, and somehow he didn't seem to mind talking about it. "How long were you married?"

"Twenty months and six days." There was no pause to count, no hesitation. He knew exactly how many days of marriage he'd been given before it was all snatched away from him.

"I'm so sorry." It was all I could say, because the next logical question would have been to ask how she died, and I couldn't bring myself to do it. It wasn't my business.

He sniffed. "It was a long time ago. Nearly three years."

I hesitated but felt the need to speak. "I don't think three years is a very long time when it comes to such things."

He looked up at me, his chin pulled up, his mouth tense and his eyes bright with unshed tears. Finally he gave a little nod, swallowing hard before saying, "No, it isn't long at all."

I had more questions. Had Isabel been from here? Where had they lived when they'd been married? Did the servants here remember her? But I bit back any further inquiries, choosing to explain instead. "I'm sorry to bring it up," I said as his hurt reached into my own heart, making it squeeze. "It's just... it felt wrong to know without you knowing. Otherwise, I would never have said anything..."

He nodded but kept his eyes fixed on the trees. I remained silent, wishing to give him time to gather himself together again, to get used to the idea that his most painful secret was known by me, someone he likely didn't even consider a friend.

Eventually he cleared his throat, looking lost as he cast his eyes about. "I'm sorry, but might we postpone your lesson just this once. I—"

"Of course," I agreed. "That's a good idea." I picked up my bow. "I'll leave you be." I turned to go but then turned back. "I'm sorry," I said again, knowing the words weren't enough. Words were never enough when it came to loss.

He accepted my condolences with a nod, and I hurried away, anxious to give him the space he clearly needed.

Emeline and I had just finished cleaning up from dinner. All the other servants had eaten, and we were waiting for Hunter to come in and join us for a meal. Emeline had long ago gotten tired of eating separately from her husband, and we'd decided that it was easiest for the three of us to simply eat together after we'd fed everyone else.

I took three bowls over to the pot that sat by the fire and was in the midst of filling them with stew when the back door opened and Hunter came in.

He let out a deep and dramatic sigh.

"Oh dear," Emeline lamented. "What's happened now?"

Hunter slumped in a chair at the table and scrubbed a hand through his hair. "Someone is poaching again."

Emeline's shoulders sank. "At Bridgefield?"

Hunter nodded. "Mr. Kenton found multiple traps set. They were good traps, well set, but they weren't his."

Worry wound in my gut. "Has Mr. Lockley seen anything similar here?" I asked.

"I just spoke with him and he says he hasn't seen anything on Sutton property. He assumes those poaching on Bridgefield land are doing so because there is no master in residence."

"But," I said, "there is no master in residence here either."

"Yes, but that's temporary," Emeline pointed out.

"We know it's temporary, but the poachers might not," Hunter said. "It bears watching." He

scrubbed a hand over his face as I set his bowl in front of him. "I just hope Mr. Kenton can catch them soon."

We let the subject drop, speaking instead of how different things were now that Sir James and Princess Marilee were gone.

"I know you're bored," Hunter said to Emeline with a knowing glint in his eye.

"I am not bored," she countered.

"Ha!" I couldn't help but say. "You are the very definition of bored. It's all you can do to prevent yourself from making new and exciting dishes for our absent master and mistress to try."

"Ugh," she groaned, throwing her head back. "Fine. It's true. I very much miss Marilee and her enthusiasm for all my efforts."

"I appreciate your efforts," Hunter said, leaning over to kiss her cheek.

Though her mouth curved, she fought the smile. "It's not the same. Her Highness has such a wide and varied taste in food, and new dishes excite her every time. Cooking for her is so gratifying." Her sigh was a lament.

"I'll have to be more effusive in the future," I said. "Next meal, I will be sure to be in raptures over everything."

She scoffed. "Don't bother. I know you'd just be humoring me." She stood and picked up her empty bowl. "Or would *mocking* be a more appropriate word?" she asked with a challenging lift of her brow.

"What? I would never mock. I love your cooking. You know that." It was true. I did. Perhaps I didn't appreciate the varied flavors, but the quality of Emeline's food and the reliability of it was something I appreciated very much indeed.

Emeline's reliability in all things was something I appreciated. She was the sister I'd never had, and I would never be able to thank her enough for the joy she brought my brother.

I left the kitchens with my large basket over my arm, surprised when I turned and found Rowan leaning against the outer wall of the kitchen. He immediately pushed himself upright when he saw me and a nervous flutter leapt in my stomach. I hadn't seen him since we'd spoken of Isabel three days ago.

"Are you heading to the village?" he asked.

"Yes," I answered, suspicious and confused by his abrupt appearance. I had expected him to avoid me after our last conversation. It couldn't have been comfortable for him, knowing that I knew his secret.

"I'll join you," he said.

"Why?"

He gave a careless shrug. "Why not?"

His demeanor was different today. He was neither the arrogant flirt nor the vulnerable husband in mourning. He was something in between, and I didn't know how to react to this version of Rowan. So I didn't argue with him or agree with his self-invitation. I just started walking, not offering any objection when he fell into step beside me.

"Were you waiting for me to leave?" I asked.

"Yes."

"You're lucky you caught me. I usually go early in the morning."

"I know."

I looked up at him, surprised. "You know?"

He cleared his throat. "Yes. You're usually gone by now."

I pulled back in surprise. "How do you know that?"

His eyes cut over to me for only a moment before turning ahead once more. "I've made a habit of familiarizing myself with everyone's routines."

How strange. "Why?"

He lifted a shoulder, seeming a little uncomfortable. "Curiosity. Vigilance. A need to control my environment. Call it what you will."

Honestly, I didn't know what to call it, except perhaps—"Disconcerting," I murmured. "So then why were you waiting for me if you expected me to be gone?"

"Emeline mentioned you planned to go later."

I blinked. I had mentioned my change in plans to Emeline so that we could adjust our chores. But..."Why would she tell you that?"

He looked ahead, taking a moment to breathe before turning to look me in the eye. "Because I asked."

His direct gaze made my stomach clench. It was unsettling, yet I couldn't look away, nor did I want to. There was something delicious about being caught in his eyes. I swallowed. "You asked after me?"

He nodded slowly, his eyes roaming over my face. "I wanted to walk with you. I enjoy our conversations."

My eyes dropped to the ground, unsure what to make of such a confession. Perhaps he only wanted someone to speak with about Isabel.

Our footsteps crunched over the gravel road. But I couldn't look at him, much less speak.

"So then," he said, finally breaking the silence, "why are you leaving at a different time?"

His admission had thrown my thoughts into disarray, so it took me some time to internally debate over whether I wanted him to know my reasons for leaving later. In the end, my need to understand Rowan, as well as Johnny, Oliver, and Tyson, won out. "I'm conducting an experiment."

"How so?"

"It's been my habit to get to market early, and upon my last two visits, the constables have been out, more visible and present than I've ever seen them. I wanted to go at a different time to see if perhaps they have a habit of interfering early, when the market is busier."

"Hmm. I believe they make their presence known until the last vendor has packed up their stall."

"And how do you know that?" I asked with thick skepticism. But then as I looked at him—at his guilty face and knowing gaze—the obvious answer struck me, and I let out a disgusted sigh. "Do you go thieving every week, then?"

"The objective isn't the theft. We're trying to balance the scales, to reclaim at least some of what has been stolen. And we don't only steal from the constables."

Shock and horror surely blanketed my face. "You steal from others as well?"

He pulled a frustrated hand down his face. "That's not what I meant. What I meant is that stealing isn't the only thing we do to help."

I focused on the road ahead, unsure if that was any better. "What gave you the idea of stealing to help anyway?"

"My wife."

My feet stuttered and I turned to stare at him in shock. Perhaps his wife *was* the reason he wanted to speak with me. A small bit of jealousy curled in my chest, but my more prominent feeling was pleasure. I was flattered that he would voluntarily share this part of himself with me. I hadn't expected him to ever speak of his wife again, much less mention her so casually. "How so?" I managed to ask after my shock wore off.

"The first time I saw Isabel, she was stealing food for herself."

My heart cried out for young Isabel, knowing what it was like to be that girl.

"She was eleven. I found out later that her parents had died only a few weeks before. She hadn't been on the streets for long, and she really wasn't any good at stealing. I was there with my mother, selling our herbs. That was before the apothecary set up his shop in the High Street. My mother and I were familiar with the other vendors. We considered them friends. So when Isabel came along and grabbed a handful of dried meats from the man next to us, I told him I'd go after her." A small smile curved his mouth. "And I did."

"Did you catch her?"

"Yes, easily. She was starving and had little strength and no stamina. I cornered her and demanded she return the food. She started crying and handed the meats back without any argument."

"She was desperate," I said, knowing exactly how that felt. The gnawing hunger, the fear that daylight would run out before you found enough scraps to quiet the growling of your belly.

He just nodded. "I didn't know what to do. I'd run after her, ready to do the right thing, return the stolen goods. But her eyes tore me apart. She was so small and frail, I thought she was younger than

me at the time."

"Did you return the food?" I asked.

He gave a slow shake of his head. "No. I told her to wait for me. I went back and told the man that I hadn't been able to catch her, then I took a portion of the lunch my mother had packed for us and I brought it back to her."

He fell silent, and after a while, I was too curious to hold my tongue. "Then what?" I prompted.

He looked over at me like he'd almost forgotten I was there, then he smiled. "She came back the next week, but instead of stealing, she just came up to our stall—tentative, terrified. I gave her my portion of lunch again."

I chewed on my lip as I absorbed the story. "How long did this go on?" I asked.

"A few more weeks, though I noticed the amount of food my mother brought started to increase."

I smiled at that. "She was helping you."

He nodded. "Eventually my mother took matters into her own hands. She invited Isabel to stay with us for a time. We fed her well, allowed her a chance to clean up and get her strength back. Then my mother helped her to find a position in the village, working in a tailor's shop."

"And you remained friends?"

He nodded. "I was her only friend for several years, certainly the only one she trusted." His eyes took on a faraway look and he fell silent.

"I didn't mean to pry," I said, wondering if I should apologize for asking him question after question about such a tender topic.

His brow furrowed. "It's actually a relief to speak of her." There was surprise in his voice. "I haven't done much of that." He sniffed, but no tears escaped his eyes.

"Why not?" I asked gently.

He thought it over before responding. "I'm not certain. I think I just wanted to keep her for myself." It was a beautiful thought and it made my heart squeeze with wanting. What would it be like to have someone who wanted to keep me for themselves? Such a love was difficult to imagine.

"So," he said, "my wife was the one who convinced me that thievery was not always a bad thing." "Because she stole one handful of dried meats?" That didn't seem to make sense.

"No. Because she made it her business to fight for anyone she saw who was desperate and in need. And sometimes that meant bending the rules"—he nodded his head to one side—"or bending the law."

I didn't respond, because while I didn't agree with him, it was hard for me to fully disagree either. I had been that girl—the one who stole when the aching hunger became too much—the one who had needed someone to see me and help. I suppose I could have told him as much, but that wasn't who I was anymore. I'd endeavored to move beyond that life, and sinking back into the justifications I'd used as a child wouldn't help the here and now.

I looked over at him, but he was looking ahead, calm and serene. The strong features of his face made my throat feel tight, and I started to wish he would look at me just so I could see if his eyes were as strikingly blue as I remembered.

Laws, I was being ridiculous. He still mourned his dead wife. It was pointless to think he would look at me with any serious intent.

So I changed the subject. "Do you think you'll ever manage to win the festival competition?" I asked.

His step stuttered and his eyes caught mine. Yes. Just as blue as I'd thought. "You mean for archery?" he asked.

"No, I mean for knot tying," I teased, trying to distract myself from...all of him. "Yes, for archery. What else would I be talking about? I'm certain you have no chance at winning anything else."

He blustered for a moment. "I'll have you know I'm very good with knots."

"Now you're just boasting."

He raised one eyebrow at me. "I hardly think that defending myself against a disparaging remark qualifies as *boasting*."

"Are you avoiding the original question?" I asked with a tilt of my head.

He snorted. "I can't even remember what it was."

"The competition," I reminded him. "Are you going to win it this year?"

"Yes."

The way he said it—simple as that: Yes. No hesitation. No timidity. No arrogance, even.

"Easy as that?" I asked. "Just yes?"

"Shall I feign doubt?" The confidence that rolled off of him drew me in even more. Laws, there was nothing quite so attractive as a confident man.

"You really believe no one can beat you?" I asked, scrambling to keep the conversation going.

"I would say my father, but his eyesight isn't what it once was."

The urge to keep teasing him was strong, but it was difficult to poke fun at a man who knew exactly who he was and what capabilities he had.

We continued on in a silence that was almost comfortable, but not quite.

We came upon the village and as we neared the edge of the market, I realized that Johnny, Oliver and Tyson were there, no doubt waiting to help Rowan with whatever brazen plan he had.

As were Ansel and Gretchen.

I stopped in my tracks, turning to grab Rowan's arm. "No!" I objected, keeping my voice quiet so the others would not overhear. "Not Gretchen. You can't bring her into this. She's too young," I insisted, shaking my head viciously. "She doesn't fully understand what it all means." I knew that all too well from experience. She might think it was fun now, but she'd regret it later.

"Gretchen isn't involved in anything illegal," he assured me. "I promise, she's not. But there are other ways she can help those who are being targeted."

"Rowan," I pleaded.

"I'm not going to endanger her or risk her being caught." His eyes were steady and reassuring. "John would never allow that."

I sighed through my nose. He was right. Johnny would be sure Gretchen stayed out of trouble. My grip on his arm relaxed.

"It's all right," he said in a soothing voice. "I know what I'm doing." He gave me one more reassuring smile before leaving me and going to join the group of Bridgefield employees who had somehow fallen under his spell. They welcomed him with slaps on the back, seeming to all talk over one another. Gretchen caught sight of me where I stood and gave me a carefree wave then went with the lot of them as they turned and disappeared among the crowd.

Had I really just allowed a group of my friends to go off, knowing their intent was to break the law? What would Hunter do if he knew? He had run so fast and so far from the way we'd grown up—pickpocketing, stealing, and swindling. He had no tolerance for anything that reminded him of the childhood we'd had, filled with desperate thievery.

I'd thought I was the same up until a few weeks ago. I never thought I would be able to tolerate being on the wrong side of the law, yet I felt myself being pulled ever so subtly in that direction. And if I went that way—if I agreed with Rowan—I had no idea if I would be in the right or the wrong.

I finally forced my thoughts to other things. I'd decided not to interfere with whatever Rowan had planned, so I might as well get on with my shopping.

Weaving my way through the stalls, I noted that Rowan had been right. The same two village constables roamed the market at this time of day as I'd seen in weeks past, though the vendors seemed a little less tense than they had been before. I wondered if that was because they'd simply accepted the presence of the hulking lawmen or if the constables were being less aggressive.

I'd completed nearly all of my shopping when it happened. Many stalls were already closing down, and though I'd caught glimpses of both constables on multiple occasions, they always seemed to be watching without interfering. I'd grown hopeful that perhaps things were getting better. Then I saw not one but both lawmen in front of Mr. Harper's jewelry stand. One was shouting, and as I drew closer, his words became clear.

"We're here for your protection, so I suggest you show us some respect," he yelled as he stuck his finger in the jeweler's face. "We're working extra hours, needing extra patrols, and that requires payment. These taxes go toward your protection. Now, do you really want to be *without* protection?"

Mr. Harper stood still and stoic, refusing to flinch. "I do respect the authority given you by law, which is why I paid my due already. But I won't bow to threats."

"There's no threat," the constable said, putting his hands out at his sides as if to present a casual and calm facade, while the other lawman stood silently by with a menacing scowl. "We're just humble servants doing our best to stop the thieving."

The jeweler opened his mouth to reply, but both he and the constables were distracted by the young man, hooded cloak pulled up over his head, who ran forward, snatched several necklaces from the stand and then ran off.

As he passed by me, my heart jumped into my throat. The thief was Rowan, I knew it was.

"Thief!" Mr. Harper shouted, pointing after Rowan. "You say you're here to stop the thieving," he yelled at the constables. "Go stop him!"

The annoyance was clear on both constables' faces, but they each ran off grudgingly, shouting, "You there! Stop!"

I made sure to stay back, well out of their way.

My heart raced as I watched them chase after him, hoping that Rowan was fast enough and smart enough to get out of this mess. The constables were slowed down when a tall hooded figure stepped into their path, causing a collision. The lawmen cursed and the man they'd plowed into apologized. Once the constables had resumed their pursuit of Rowan, the hooded man turned, and I caught a glimpse of Johnny's self-satisfied smirk before he disappeared among the crowd.

"Quickly," I heard someone hiss from behind me.

I turned to see Tyson speaking to Mr. Harper. "You must be gone before they return, otherwise he'll demand payment again." He started putting the merchandise away and was soon joined by Oliver, Gretchen, and Ansel.

Mr. Harper seemed surprised but happy for the help, and in only a few minutes, they had packed up the man's goods, loaded them onto his handcart and sent him on his way, promising to take down and store the awning for him.

I watched in awe as they did just that, and by the time I saw the constables coming back in our direction, Mr. Harper and his jewelry were long gone and the merry band of misfits whom I called friends had disappeared into the crowd. I sank into the shadows and watched the constables' consternation when they returned to find the stall gone and put away.

A smile curved my mouth at their confusion, but I quickly smothered it and turned my back on the

scene. I needed to be gone before they decided to harass someone new.

My steps were quick and determined as I made my way through the waning crowd of the market. I didn't slow when I reached the road but hurried toward Sutton Manor, anxious to find Rowan and the others.

When I was just a little ways beyond the village, Rowan appeared at my side.

"How was market?" he asked with a grin, bumping my shoulder with his.

I rolled my eyes at his casual question, even as I let out a sigh of relief. I could see all too well the self-satisfied smirk that was just itching to get out. "There was a bit of a commotion," I said, feeling surprisingly indulgent.

"Was there?" His eyes danced as he waggled his eyebrows at me.

I tried not to smile but failed. "What are you going to do with the jewelry you stole?" I asked.

"Give it to a pretty girl."

My face seemed to spasm with several different emotions. Surprise at his blatant flirting. Disapproval. Disbelief.

"I'm jesting, of course," he assured me. "I've already returned it to its owner." He watched me, no doubt seeing the way I relaxed. "Did the constables come back?"

"Yes."

He gave a stiff nod. "They would have squeezed money out of the jeweler if he'd still been there. They've done it to others."

The accusation sat heavy in my mind. "So what you did, it was all a big distraction?"

"Yes, and a chance to make sure the constable himself didn't steal something."

"Do they do that often?"

He nodded. "I told you, I'm not stealing for the fun of it."

I let out a disgruntled sigh. "Yes, I know. And I'm glad Mr. Harper was able to leave."

"You offer your approval very grudgingly," he observed.

I shrugged. It was true. "Won't it just happen again?" I had to ask.

A ghost of a smile flitted across his mouth. "Yes. But we stopped it this time at least. Sometimes that's all we can do."

I looked behind us, wondering if Tyson, Johnny, and the rest were hiding in the woods. "Where are the others?"

"They're returning separately to be sure their help isn't connected to my thieving."

I nodded in approval then turned to study him. "Were you in danger of being caught?"

He smirked at me. "What do you think?"

"There's the arrogance I've been missing," I muttered, looking away.

"You think me arrogant?" He sounded as if that amused him.

"I know you are arrogant." I couldn't resist the jab.

"Then why give your approval at all? Why not knock me down a peg or two?"

I cut my eyes over to him. "Would that work? I don't know that I'd be able to reach so high."

He laughed. "Oh, come now. I do not truly seem arrogant, do I?"

"Often, yes." Maybe not so much lately. Lately he just came across as unflinchingly capable, but calling him that wouldn't get a rise out of him.

"Well, if that's the—" He stopped speaking, turning to look behind us. Then he grabbed my basket from me with one hand and wrapped his other arm around my waist, rushing me off the road and into the shrubbery.

"What's—"

He pulled me to the ground, putting a hand to my mouth to shush any more words. I trusted him enough to stay quiet as we crouched behind bushes and foliage, his arm still anchoring me to his side as he craned his neck, trying to see the road.

I finally heard the approach of horses coming at a trot.

"It's the constables," he said quietly as he ducked his head close to mine.

"Are they looking for *you*?" I asked in panic.

"Likely, yes."

I crouched even lower and held my breath, my heart beating in my throat as I waited for the horses to pass by. After several long moments, the clomping of their hooves faded.

Rowan let out a gust of breath beside me. "I think they're gone." For the first time, I heard nerves in his voice.

"Were you worried?" I asked as I stretched my neck, trying to see if the road was empty.

"For you, yes. If they catch me, I can handle it. I don't know that I'd be able to handle it if you were blamed for something I'd done." The sincerity in his voice left me at a loss. I suppose I hadn't considered that his protectiveness extended to me.

I turned to look at him and found that he was already staring at me. Since he had yet to release his grip on me, our sides were pressed together and his face was *right there*. His light-blue eyes snagged my attention and warmth bloomed in my chest, making my breath catch. Suddenly all the places along my side that were pressed into him felt hot, and I was keenly aware of his hand that gripped my hip.

He didn't let go right away. He seemed just as stuck as I was, his eyes roaming over my face, making my ears burn. But his was more a look of confusion, as if he was surprised to find himself in this position and wasn't sure what to think.

Then he moved. His hand slid slowly from my hip and he leaned away, taking his warmth with him. I broke eye contact and pushed my skirts out of the way so that I could climb to my feet. That hadn't meant anything. He hadn't really been looking at me in the same way I looked at him. He hadn't truly meant to caress my back when he pulled his hand away. This was all in my head.

I was brushing leaves and dirt from my skirt as he straightened, hoping the sharp movements would clear my mind.

"Did the constables see your face?" I asked in an attempt to distract us both.

"I don't believe so." His voice was gruff when he answered.

"Good." I shoved a bright red curl back behind my ear and picked my way through the undergrowth and onto the road. We continued on our way, neither of us acknowledging the oddly tense moment we'd shared. Though, to be fair, there was a chance that I was the only one who had noticed it. Perhaps Rowan hadn't felt the pull that I had. Perhaps there had been no heat for him.

He did carry my basket the rest of the way for me though.

Life felt like it had slowed down. It had taken time for us all to adapt to our new pace, but there was an ease in our days that I knew I would miss when Her Highness and Sir James returned. I supposed this was what it felt like to be on holiday like lords and ladies. I'd appreciate it while it lasted.

Emeline and I were taking our time cleaning up after everyone had eaten their evening meal, talking about the day and enjoying the quiet candlelight.

A ruckus erupted in the main part of the house and we looked at each other, curious to see what had caused the hubbub.

"I can't approve of such a thing," Beatrice declared as she burst into the kitchen, followed closely by Oliver.

"Why not?" Oliver asked.

"Because it's not done!" Beatrice insisted.

"But it *could* be done," Johnny said with a smirk as he ducked through the doorway, Ansel and Tyson following behind him.

Beatrice pointed a finger right in his face. "You, young man, do not even work here. Stop attempting to corrupt my staff."

Johnny threw his head back and laughed. "Come on, Bea," he cajoled. "Pryce has already agreed to play his pipe. Mr. Kenton has a little drum he said he'd be willing to play. We've done this a time or two over at Bridgefield. It's good for everyone."

"We don't have the time," Beatrice argued.

"The time for what?" I couldn't help but ask. Whatever it was, if Johnny and Oliver were so keen on doing it, it must be something worth doing. And besides, "It seems time is something we do have extra of these days." I nodded my head toward the stacks of already washed and dried dishes. In only a few more minutes, Emeline and I would have the kitchen fully cleaned up.

Beatrice let out a sigh of defeat, even as she continued to shake her head. "It's not proper."

"How's it not proper?" Oliver asked.

"What's not proper?" I asked, frustrated that no one would just speak plainly.

"Throwing wild, raucous parties in the barn is not proper," Beatrice declared, though I could already tell she was giving in.

Johnny laughed again as if he found Beatrice's indignation to be nothing but funny. "Dancing is supposed to be raucous, but I promise we won't be wild," he said, taking her hands in his. "It's just a bit of fun. Don't you all deserve a bit of fun?"

Beatrice pulled her hands from his and folded her arms before giving a dignified sniff. "Well, it's clear I'll not be able to stop you. Don't make me regret this, any of you." She pinned us each with her customary stern look then huffed out of the kitchen.

The boys cheered.

"Come on, lads," Johnny called. "Let's get things ready." He grabbed Oliver's shoulder and propelled him toward the door, and the rest followed, tumbling out in good humor.

I stared after them at the empty doorway before turning to Emeline. "We're having a dance tonight?"

Her smile was bemused. "So it would seem."

The idea was intriguing. "I've only ever danced at festivals, and even that wasn't for the joy of it." Emeline raised a questioning eyebrow. "Then why dance?"

"It's an excellent distraction. All that movement, all the jostling close together presented many opportunities to pick pockets," I explained.

Emeline blinked then shook her head. "Sometimes I forget how odd my husband's upbringing was." I snorted. "I'm not sure you can even call it an upbringing. Father didn't bring us *up*, he brought us...well, down."

"You had a downbringing, then?" Emeline teased with a sad little smile.

I laughed a little. "I think I'll call it that from now on."

"Do you think you can enjoy a dance without the challenge of stealing?" she teased.

"I've no doubt." In fact, the idea was thrilling. Picking pockets had been fun sometimes, but it had mostly been arduous and often scary. But I joked about it with Hunter and Emeline because it was better to see Hunter's exasperation when I made light of it than to see his guilt if I were to admit my true feelings.

"So, when is this dance to occur?" I asked.

Emeline gave a shrug. "I imagine they'll start it up as soon as they can."

I looked down at myself. My apron had preserved most of my clothing from serious food splatter, but I wasn't what I would call clean.

"I'm sure you'll have time to change after we finish here."

"Oh." I ducked my head, embarrassed that she had caught me in a moment of vanity. "I'm sure I don't need to change."

"Of course not, but if you wanted to..." She trailed off, leaving the idea hanging in the air.

We soon finished, and as I hung my apron on one of the many hooks that lined one wall, I decided I could deal with a bit of vanity. I hurried up to my room and found Nellie there, fussing with her hair.

She turned in my direction when I entered, a nervous smile clinging to her mouth. "Did you hear?" she asked.

"About the dance?" I closed the door behind me.

She nodded as she grabbed a brush. "It's such a fun idea. I was sweeping up in the parlor when the boys started hounding Beatrice about it. John had been telling Oliver how they did this over at Bridgefield on a regular basis, and Oliver was adamant that he needed to take a turn around the dance floor with a lass or two."

I smiled, my nerves somehow receding in the face of Nellie's excitement. I sat on my bed and worked to release my hair from the thick braid at the back of my head.

"Do you think John will dance?" Nellie asked in a voice barely loud enough for me to hear.

I furrowed my brow. Hmm. It seemed Nellie had an interest in Johnny. Though it was odd to hear her call him John. Rowan was the only one who'd ever called him that. "I would imagine," I answered. "He's the one who was so keen to convince Beatrice, and he doesn't even live here."

"Maybe there's a girl he wishes to dance with," she suggested.

"Maybe he'll ask you." I grabbed my brush and ran it through my curls.

She turned to face me fully and sank down onto her bed. "Do you think he would?"

I shrugged. "I don't see why not." I was careful not to laugh at the idea. She clearly held a love candle for Johnny, and I had no wish to either get her hopes up too much or crush them entirely.

"You've known him much longer than I have," I pointed out.

"Yes, but we don't speak," she said, toying with her bedpost. "He likely doesn't know my name."

"Well, I think a barn dance is a lovely chance to get to know someone," I said casually. "Don't you?"

"I hope so."

I squeezed her hand before crossing to the tiny mirror propped on our table. I didn't want to have my curls confined in a braid. This barn dance was a new and exciting prospect, filling my belly with nerves and making my heart beat a little too fast. Such an opportunity left me with a distinct desire to feel pretty. My hair was a hassle and often a disaster, but I loved it. Each time I wrestled it into submission, I wondered if my mother had done the same with her own locks.

I grabbed one of my kerchiefs and folded it a few times before tying it around my hair. That would keep my hair out of my face without confining it too much.

The lacing at the side of my dress took only a few moments to undo, and I happily stepped into a freshly laundered one. I only had three dresses, so it was fortunate that one had just been cleaned.

"Are we ridiculous?" Nellie asked from behind me.

"What do you mean?"

"We're dressing as though we were going to have tea with Her Highness."

I chuckled as I laced up my dress. "When really we're just going out to the barn."

"Yes." A blush stained her cheeks.

I shrugged, trying to hide just how excited I was. "It's an occasion. A bit of frivolity. I think it's only natural that we want to make the best of it."

She smiled in relief, her nerves showing again.

"Should we go down and see if there is anything to be done in preparation?" I suggested, not knowing how else to proceed. It wasn't as though there were a formal arrival time set or a fancy servant to announce us.

"Yes, let's," Nellie agreed.

After leaving our room, I linked my arm with hers and we went down together.

Stepping through the back door and out into the night, we could see that several of the servants had already gathered out at the barn. It was lit with far more lanterns than were ever used on a normal evening, and the murmur of excited voices could be heard across the yard.

As soon as we entered the barn, Johnny jogged over, his face just as excited as it ever was over wielding his staff. "Miriam. Nellie. Are you ready for a fun evening?"

Nellie let out a squeak beside me.

"Yes," I said in an attempt to cover it up. "And I expect you to sing and juggle for us if need be."

He waved off the suggestion. "Dancing will be plenty of entertainment, you'll see." He backed away with a grin.

I leaned close to Nellie. "See. He does know your name."

She shushed me as her hand fluttered at her throat. I grinned.

Lanterns hung from every available peg, giving the space a warm and bright glow. Pryce and Mr. Kenton sat on hay bales at one end of the barn, their pipe and drum at the ready.

It was Rowan's laugh that made me lift my head and look for him. Pryce's children, Ansel and Lindy, appeared to be weaving quite the tale for him. Ten-year-old Lindy's arms were raised above her head as she stretched on her tiptoes. Perhaps they were retelling one of Cecily's old stories. She had a knack for spinning grand adventures, and I'd heard that Ansel and Lindy were among her first devoted listeners. Cecily still told stories on occasion, though now she did so in front of her own

cottage instead of in the stables.

Rowan listened to their story, his attention never wavering. The way he smiled down at them, the lantern light reflecting off his eyes, left me entranced. Laws, he was a fine-looking man. The pull of attraction left me so distracted that I failed to notice Lindy had finished her story. Rowan looked up, and fate led his eyes to land on me.

His grin turned just a little smug. I looked away and tried to act as if he hadn't just caught me leaning against a barn pole and staring at him unabashedly.

Would he come over and talk to me? Half of me wanted him to and the other half didn't. Speaking to him now would be embarrassing and he'd probably tease me for staring, but the pull I felt was strong enough that perhaps the embarrassment would be worth it. My anxiety spiked as I waited to see if he would or if he wouldn't.

Johnny stepped into the middle of the little crowd and lifted his hands. "Shall we strike a beat and kick up our heels?" he asked the group at large.

I cheered along with everyone else as Mr. Kenton started a beat on his drum and Pryce joined in with his pipe.

Johnny waved Gretchen over. "Come on, Gretchen. Let's show them how it's done."

Gretchen bounced right over to her brother. They faced each other, hands on their hips, and at the *da-dum* of Mr. Kenton's drum, they each stepped forward and to the left, turning so their right elbows touched. Then they stepped to the other side, their knees high with each step. Their movements grew bigger and Gretchen took her skirts in hand, adding a wide swish to her steps. As they continued, there were turns, claps, and kicks. At one point, Johnny even picked up his sister by the waist as she jumped from one side of him to the other. Gretchen's smile grew, her face becoming more animated, and the swish of her skirts got bigger and bigger.

Ansel stood in the corner, leaning against a wall. His face became more entranced as he watched her. The twelve-year-old looked positively smitten.

I felt a warmth at my side and a prickling sensation ran down my spine, prompting me to turn and find Rowan standing just behind my shoulder, watching the dancers.

"Have you watched long enough?" he asked.

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning"—he looked down at me—"will you dance with me?"

My chest fluttered, but I think I managed to keep the utter delight from bombarding my face. "Yes," I answered.

He grinned, grabbed my hand, and pulled me onto the dance floor. I'd been watching long enough that I was able to quickly pick up the steps. Rowan didn't follow the exact pattern that Johnny and Gretchen had demonstrated, but his variation was easy enough to follow. And even though I knew it was coming, each time he wrapped his hands around my waist so I could jump from one side to the other, my stomach would swoop and my ears would heat. It was nerve-racking and wonderful.

I'd only barely gotten into the rhythm of the dance when it ended, and my disappointment was keen. The opportunity to dance with Rowan had been much too short. We stood side by side and clapped for the tiny little band that was playing for us—though a piper and a drummer could hardly be called a band. When they started up another song, I intended to step to the side and make room for others, but Rowan caught my hand, tugging me closer and then urging me into a spin.

"Do you mind?" he asked as he escorted me around the floor with his right hand holding mine and his left arm wrapped around my lower back.

"Not at all," I assured him as heat stained my face.

He pulled me around to face him. I recognized the tune. This dance wasn't about high steps and footwork. It was about spins. We started with our right hands pressed palm to palm. Each time the music crescendoed, Rowan pushed on my hand, propelling me into a full turn and then catching me, palm to palm, with the opposite hand. From there, we stepped together, one, two, three, in a broad triangle across the floor, then he pushed against my hand again and I would spin, skirts flaring out then wrapping around my legs as I came to a stop.

My breathing was soon labored, not only from the exertion of dancing but from the way Rowan's gaze burned into mine each time I came around to face him again.

When the aching pleasure in my heart became too much, I looked away, distracting myself by noting the other dancers. Gretchen was just pulling Ansel onto the floor. He looked awkward and nervous but eager to please. Gretchen was bouncing, her excitement and energy too much to contain. She threw herself into the dance, leaving Ansel to flail as he tried to keep up.

When our dance ended, I was disappointed. That one opportunity to twirl around the floor with Rowan still didn't feel like nearly enough. Suddenly my body felt that the only right place to be was in close proximity to him, and that was most disconcerting. I didn't like the feeling of needing someone, wanting someone. I didn't like it...did I?

But then he asked me to dance again. And again still. Each time he led me onto the dance floor, my relief was so thick that it was difficult to ignore my growing attraction to him. He, too, seemed to grow in confidence with each dance. He was more relaxed and more willing to pull me closer. Was it just familiarity? Or did the way he pulled me in mean something more?

When we weren't dancing, he and I were often standing off to the side, speaking of silly things, commenting on the coordination of the dancers and the way that Johnny never seemed to slow down.

"Is he ever going to take a break?" I asked with a laugh as we watched Johnny twirl his mother across the floor.

Rowan leaned closer, resting a hand on the small of my back. "Why take a break when there is fun to be had?"

Warmth seeped into my back from where he touched me. "There's more to life than fun," I pointed out.

"Of course. Fun is rare, which is why it must be *seized* when the opportunity arises," he said, giving my side a squeeze when he said "seized."

The evening passed in a beautiful blur of laughter and music. Rowan's parents stopped in to take a turn about the floor. And even Beatrice graced us with her reluctant presence, only to leave shortly after Oliver coaxed her into a dance. I laughed at the way she tried to give us a disapproving glance, even as her eyes danced with gaiety. She wanted to be so proper, but she was still the woman who had stooped to subterfuge to help Marilee when Her Highness lived under the oppression of her first husband.

Nellie got her wish. Not only did she dance with Johnny twice, but Oliver coaxed her into dancing with him three times, and she took turns spinning around the barn with several other men. As did I. The quarters were cramped, but everyone was eager to take part in the fun, no matter their age.

I danced with Rowan a total of five times. Five opportunities to graze hands and lock eyes and have his hands wrap around me. They were moments that seared me with aching want, filling my head with euphoria and confusion long after I'd climbed into bed.

I showed up for my lesson, determined to focus on my bow and arrow and nothing else. If I strayed into other topics, I would want to talk about dancing last night and the way it made me think that

Rowan and I could have something together. But if I broached that subject, we would have to talk about Isabel. Was he still in love with her? And if we were going to discuss serious things like attractive young men still being in love with their dead wives, then I would inevitably want to talk about his thieving. If he was determined to be the one thing I refused to become, then how could we possibly proceed? It was foolish to think I could ever be at peace with a man I knew was operating outside the law.

His reasons were just so good, though, and as much as I wanted to see the world in black and white, I knew it wasn't. Rowan was helping people. The constables weren't.

When I knocked on the Lockleys' cottage door, it was Mrs. Lockley who opened it. She gave me an easy smile. "Hello, Miriam."

"Afternoon, Mrs. Lockley. Is Rowan about?"

"Should be back any minute now. He was out helping his father." She leaned out the doorway to look past me, but neither of us saw either of the Lockley men coming this way.

"I'll go to the range. Will you let him know I'm waiting there for him?"

"Of course."

I thanked her and circled the house, going past the herb garden and deeper into the woods. I was grateful I'd brought my small collection of arrows, since Hunter wasn't around to lend me a quiver of his. I took up my spot a little farther from the target than usual, wanting a bit of a challenge. All four arrows landed low on the target but none missed, and the consistency was gratifying. I slung my bow over my shoulder and trekked over to the target to retrieve my arrows. As I pulled the second one from the straw, a whistled tune caught my attention. I looked past the target to see Rowan meandering toward his cottage, a dead rabbit swinging from one hand.

"Hello, Rowan," I called out.

His whistling cut off abruptly and he stopped in his tracks. "Miriam. I'm sorry, I didn't realize how late it was. I'll be right back." He headed toward the cottage and I pulled my other arrows from the target.

I was back in position, trying to relax my shoulders, when a thought hit me.

Hunter had told me that poachers were targeting Bridgefield land again. The traps that had been set had been done with skill. And Rowan had just returned from the direction of Bridgefield with a dead rabbit in hand.

Who better to set a trap than the son of a gamekeeper?

My mind churned over itself. When the wind picked up, pushing my hair into my face and tugging at my cloak, I pushed my curls aside absentmindedly, too distracted by the possibility that Rowan could be involved in poaching.

I hated that I even thought it was a possibility. And yet, if he could justify thievery in the name of justice for those less fortunate, why could he not justify poaching as well?

Oh, how I hoped I was wrong.

"Sorry about that," Rowan said as he jogged over to me, his bow in hand and a smile on his face. The smile fell when he noticed my own expression, which I could only imagine was one of dismay. "Are you all right?" he asked with real curiosity.

I shook my head, not knowing how to answer or how to ask the question that I knew I must ask.

"Did something happen?" he asked, all concern, which only served to confuse me further.

Had something happened? I didn't know yet. I searched his face, wanting to see his reaction when I told him what I knew. "My brother. He said there has been more poaching of late..."

His gaze immediately fled from mine and he cleared his throat. "Yes, I had heard." His weight

shifted from one foot to the other.

The way he avoided eye contact made my heart drop. "Rowan, where did that rabbit come from?" I asked, fearing I already knew the answer.

He let out a small sigh and kicked at the ground before raising his head. When his gaze met mine, he gave a sad smile. "I think you know where it came from, Miriam."

My hope sank into the ground. "You're the poacher?" I asked in a whisper.

"Yes," he said, reaching out to me, but I pulled away. Hurt flashed across his face and his hand dropped back to his side. "But it's not what you think. It was Mr. Kenton's idea."

My brow jumped and I blinked several times before my brain started to work again. "Mr. Kenton's idea? The Bridgefield gamekeeper had the idea for you to steal game from the land of the Duke of Winberg?!" I shouted, unable to believe it.

"Yes," he said simply.

I shook my head. "I don't believe you. He's the duke's gamekeeper. He's supposed to protect the animals from poachers."

His mouth hardened into a thin line. "And he does. We aren't poachers."

"Oh," I scoffed, narrowing my eyes at him. "Do explain how you can possibly make *that* claim with a straight face."

He sighed as though it was a great frustration to have to explain this to me. "One day, John and I were out walking Bridgefield land with Mr. Kenton. We all noticed the way the number of animals had increased, and eventually he turned to John and me and said, 'All these animals and no one in residence to shoot them for sport or to put on the table.' He said it was a waste—an 'utter disgrace,' he called it—that villagers should be going hungry when there was an overabundance of game on the duke's property."

I just shook my head. "It's one thing for a gamekeeper to lament about the waste of such things, but you can't tell me that he truly meant for you to start stealing game from the duke's land."

He waved that aside. "Whether he meant to suggest it or not, he was right. It *is* an utter disgrace to have food aplenty running around these woods while villagers can't scrape together enough for a meal. We started on Sutton land, of course."

I blanched. "Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

"I'm the son of a gamekeeper, Miriam. It's part of my father's job to utilize the resources of this land. And this is an excellent use." He looked at me as if daring me to contradict. "But being a gamekeeper's son also means I know not to thin the herds too much. We branched out to Bridgefield land when the demand became too high."

"With Mr. Kenton's knowledge?"

He shrugged. "I think he knows it's us, but he hasn't said it in words."

"And what about last year?" I asked, suddenly remembering the poaching that had happened soon after I'd come here. "Was that you?"

He took a deep breath. "Yes," he said, his voice apologetic. "I knew people were going hungry and I could help. Bel would have wanted me to help."

The mention of his wife made me ache for him, but I couldn't let his grief excuse his behavior. "It's still wrong," I insisted with a shake of my head.

He gave a shrug. "I think the hungry mouths we feed would disagree."

"I've been hungry, Rowan. That doesn't mean that what I did to get food was right."

He took a deep breath, pressing his lips together as he exhaled through his nose. Then he nodded once. "I'm sorry you feel that way." His tone made it clear that he did not expect to come to an

agreement.

He was right. I could not agree with his methods, and he would not admit they were flawed.

I should have stuck to my original determination not to discuss Rowan's lawlessness.

My shoulders dropped in defeat and I turned my attention to the target, disappointment washing through me as I realized we might never agree. The rest of my lesson was routine and unfulfilling as I came to the conclusion that I might always be at odds with Rowan.

It had only been a week since I'd been to market, but everything felt significantly worse, like a disastrous turning point in one of Cecily's stories. But instead of being exciting, it was just terrifying. I didn't like how the story was going. It wasn't merely the occasional harassment of vendors, subtle enough that they could be ignored or brushed off. Magistrate Reeve patrolled the market himself, encouraging and participating in the intimidation. Instead of the energetic hustle and bustle that had been so prominent only a month ago, the air was filled with tension. Voices were tight and wary as they called to one another.

I didn't like it at all. I went immediately to Wick's stand at the other end of the market. Even he looked wound up, like he was ready to throw a punch at any moment.

"Wick," I called as I approached.

His eyes darted up, softening only a little when he saw me. "Miss Miriam." He tried to smile. "What can I do for you?"

I looked around, even more unsettled by how unsettled he seemed. "What's happening?"

He gave a deep sigh, fixing his eyes over my shoulder. "What do you think?"

I followed his gaze and saw Magistrate Reeve standing with his hands on his hips, the dark brown of his uniform standing out against the faded colors of the people who moved past him, giving him a wide berth.

I traced the magistrate's line of sight and saw one of his constables speaking with a vendor who was arguing, gesturing widely toward his goods and then himself.

"Are they still causing trouble?" I asked, though I hardly needed to. It was clear enough.

"Worse," Wick answered.

I turned to look at him, needing an explanation.

"They're demanding pay."

I blanched. "Again?" I asked, shocked. "But just last week..."

"They say they need more, else they can't protect us all," he said with a barely restrained sneer.

My eyes widened. "Protect us? From whom?"

"Whatever thieves they're hiring to make trouble."

"They—" My shock cut my voice off, and it took me a moment to find it again. "They've hired thieves to make trouble for vendors who don't pay?" Was that really the case, or was *Rowan's* thieving the thing that justified the magistrate's extortion? Laws, were Rowan and the other lads making things *worse*?

"Certainly seems that way," Wick said, scrubbing a hand over his eyes. "They first started demanding payment two weeks ago. They called it a new tax, suggesting there was an increase in criminal activity and that the need to hire additional peacekeepers meant more taxes." His voice was steeped in bitterness. "Only, none of us had seen any new criminal activity, not unless you count what the constables themselves have been taking without payment."

The knot in my chest loosened a little. Perhaps the boys hadn't caused this after all.

"Then today, from the moment we set up our stalls, there's been petty theft after petty theft. The constables chase after them but don't ever seem to nab 'em."

"Does anyone recognize the thieves?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Nah. But they're all small. I can't help but think they've convinced a group of urchins to help them."

I blinked in surprise. "So, they're...children?" It felt like there was a rock in my stomach.

He nodded. "It's how they disappear into the crowd so easy."

I was intimately familiar with that tactic. If pursuers can't see you above the heads of everyone else, it makes you difficult to track.

Children. It was children committing the crimes, not Rowan and the boys at all.

My nose wrinkled in disgust. I absolutely despised the idea of the magistrate using children for his crooked deeds. "I don't understand. How can they do this?"

He gave a bitter shrug. "They're the law. Now, you best be moving on. Gather what you need, then get home. Today ain't the day to linger."

I took his words to heart and did my shopping as quickly as possible then left straightaway. The walk home brought tumultuous thoughts. I didn't understand how this could be happening. The flagrant abuse of power had to be noticed by someone who could do something about it. I wished for the hundredth time that Sir James and Princess Marilee were not away visiting Dalthia. They had connections and respect. They could have done something.

What about the shopkeepers? Were they also subject to this new tax? If so, did they have the influence to make a change? And if not, if Reeve continued to support them, then what recourse did the rest of us have? I was ashamed to realize that I didn't know much about the political chain of command. I knew the magistrate was subject to the high magistrate and the duke, but was there anyone else? Anyone closer? Anyone who would listen?

I entered the kitchen, hung my cloak, unloaded the basket of goods, and started snapping beans before I realized that both Emeline and Hunter were staring at me.

"Oh," I said as I took in their curious faces. "Hunter, I didn't see you there."

"Clearly," he commented with a concerned raise of one eyebrow.

"How are you both today?" I asked, sounding odd even to my own ears.

Emeline shook her head. "Never mind us. What's worrying you?"

I kept snapping for several moments, not knowing where to start. I wanted to follow the laws and had managed to do just that for years. But now? How could I support a system that was so very broken?

Hunter pulled a stool over and sat across from me. "Miri," he prodded.

I let out a gusty sigh. "There are some things happening at the market. Bad things."

His concern was immediate. "What bad things?"

"The new magistrate, he's...he's put a new tax in place. He's making all the vendors pay so that he'll protect them from thievery."

Hunter thought on that. "That's...unfortunate, but perhaps necessary."

"Wick thinks it's the magistrate himself who's arranged for more thieving to happen."

Hunter's face folded into doubt. "That seems highly unlikely."

"Wick says the vendors only noticed an increase in thieving *after* the tax was instituted. And he's using children to do it."

He looked dumbfounded by the idea. I knew the feeling. "Wick knows that for certain?"

I became less sure. "No, not for certain, but from what he's seen..."

He thought for several long moments. "I don't know what to say, Miri. If what you say is true, then that's very bad." He frowned, concern marring his brow. "Perhaps it's an exaggeration?" He sounded hopeful.

"I saw it, Hunter," I said with confidence. "I saw them harassing a vendor. I saw one of the constables steal from a vendor himself."

He stood and started pacing. I could see his mind racing, turning over the situation and its implications. Then he turned back to me. "Are you certain? Those are strong accusations, Miri."

"They've been going around the homes, demanding more taxes as well."

"Taxes are a part of organized society."

"Ugh!" I nearly screamed in frustration then jabbed my finger in the direction of Murrwood. "Go into the village next market day. See for yourself. Everyone is tense and wary. The constables prowl around, and everyone does their best to avoid them. They *are* corrupt." I was right, wasn't I? I wasn't overreacting. I had *seen* things.

"How could that be?" Hunter questioned.

I opened my mouth, ready to battle with him. It might be difficult for him to stomach. Laws, I understood that. But he needed to believe me.

"Hunter," Emeline interrupted. "What Miriam says makes sense."

He turned immediately to his wife. "How so?" he asked, confused. I, too, wondered why Emeline would think any of this made sense. It certainly didn't make sense to me.

"Reeve isn't a good man," she said with conviction.

Hunter looked confused. "The new magistrate? How do you know that? Has he done something?"

"Not recently, but he came here when Cecily was in trouble. Sir James gave her a chance to leave, but it was Reeve who dragged her back." The way Emeline's arms crossed stiffly over her chest made it clear that what had happened all those years ago still made her angry.

"What happened to Cecily is awful, but that does not mean Reeve is doing anything illegal. From what I know of that situation," he began gently, "Reeve was acting in good faith, thinking the law had claim on Cecily. He was doing his job."

There was flint in Emeline's eyes. "He was unnecessarily cruel."

"Even Princess Marilee agreed he was unworthy of the post," I added. "I heard her telling Sir James as much the day before they left. She was angry that someone of his ilk would be given the position."

"You know how much I respect Her Highness. But I imagine she feels that way for the same reason Emeline does," he said, glancing at his wife. "And that seems to be based on one very unfortunate incident that Reeve himself was not responsible for."

I opened my mouth to argue, but he held up a hand.

"I'm not saying you're wrong. I'm just saying that we need more information before we go accusing the highest authority in the area of corruption."

"All kinds of people can be corrupt, Hunter. You know that."

"Yes. But let's wait until we know about this one for sure. Let's keep our heads. We don't want to invite trouble here. And that's what we'd be doing if we were to go throwing accusations at the magistrate." He reached out for Emeline's hand. "We don't want to give him any reason to come after us."

I wanted to continue to argue and insist that I was right, but unfortunately my brother had a point. What if we accused Reeve? How could it do any good to antagonize those who enforced the law? I

didn't have proof, and even if I did, who would we take it to? Who could we convince to go to the high magistrate?

And even if we could prove it, I wasn't sure that Hunter would ever agree with what Rowan and the others were doing. That truth sat heavy on my heart. I didn't want to be at odds with Hunter, but if I decided to go against Reeve, I would be. I didn't want to go against the law. I wanted to be good for Hunter's sake. I wanted to make him proud, and I wanted to repay him for all he'd done for me.

Hunter thought I didn't know what had prompted him to wake me in the middle of the night when I was only ten years old. He'd told me we were leaving because Papa was in over his head and he was worried the two of us would get caught up in something dangerous.

It was strange and frightening leaving my father, but I'd done it. My love for Hunter was greater than my desperate need to gain Papa's approval. Hunter's claim that Papa was striking a deal that would go bad had stuck with me, tumbling around in my head on cold nights, mixing with the memory of how they had fought right before Papa had met with those men. In the months before we'd run away, Hunter and Papa had been arguing more and more, but the way they fought that night was different. Bigger. More dramatic. And as Hunter and I had labored to build a new life for ourselves, I'd continued to go over it all in my mind. Bits and pieces of Papa's meeting tangled with the fight he had with Hunter and the worry I saw in Hunter's eyes each time he looked over his shoulder. As the weeks and months had gone by, all the pieces of the puzzle had haltingly fit themselves together in my mind, and the truth of what my father intended to do burned away the remainder of my innocence.

He'd arranged to sell me. That was why he and Hunter had fought. That was the deal my brother could not abide.

Such things were not very common and they were certainly illegal. However, traveling performers were only the problem of the local lawmen for as long as they were in town. Festival rats never stayed in one place long, so few magistrates bothered to involve themselves in their goings-on.

Festival rats. It's what outsiders called us when they wished to be unkind. It's what we called ourselves so they wouldn't know how much it hurt.

Even now, as I looked back on that first year away from Father, things hadn't been so bad, at least not from my childish point of view. I couldn't fathom how much Hunter must have hidden his struggles. He'd been destitute, left with nothing but a ten-year-old little sister to follow after him and complain when there wasn't enough food. But he'd worked hard mucking stalls, allowing me to help when I could. He caught me picking pockets twice, and the disappointment in his eyes had convinced me that it wasn't worth it. So I'd trained myself to hold my hands together tightly to help me resist the urge to dip into whatever coat or cloak I passed by. Eventually I'd found work as a scullery maid, but it was hard work, and that alone took its toll. But through it all, Hunter was there. I never had to wonder if he cared.

I hated that I was now keeping secrets from him. I was agreeing more and more with a band of young men who justified thievery. Hunter would see it as a betrayal. I knew he would.

I just didn't know if he'd be right.

I went out to Rowan's practice range, hoping he wouldn't mind that I was using it without permission. I was so angry at the magistrate. But it wasn't just anger. It was also sadness that I was at odds with my brother. It was frustration and fear and confusion.

I started shooting, aiming one arrow right after the other, anxious to exert energy and rid myself of at least a portion of all my complicated and convoluted emotions.

"I take it you were dismayed by what you found at market today?"

I had an arrow nocked and drawn back as Rowan asked his question from behind me, and I kept it there as I thought through my answer. Though my arm started to shake with the strain, I held it. There was no answer. I wanted there to be a clear answer. Right. Wrong. No in between.

Rowan's gentle voice came from just behind me. "It's time to let go, Miri."

I released the arrow, my chest heaving as I breathed in and out, fighting the urge to cry or to scream. "Were you there?" I finally asked.

"Yes," he said.

"Is he using children?" My voice shook with the inquiry, not sure I wanted the answer. "Is Reeve using kids?"

"From what I saw today—yes," he said gently, like he knew it would hurt me.

I turned to face him, the edges of my face tensed in dismay. "I don't know what to do," I admitted. "I'm so angry!" Angry enough that I felt like crying with the admission.

"At me?" he asked, looking oddly vulnerable.

"Of course not! I'm mad at him—at Reeve. He's using children. *Children*." I'd been a thief as a festival rat—a girl under the control of her father, a tool to be used for gain, punished for underperforming, praised for bringing in extra coins or a pretty piece of jewelry. I knew what it was to be that child. But I couldn't tell him that. I wasn't ready, not yet. "I'm mad that nothing makes sense. This is my home, my safe place, and it feels like that serenity is being torn apart."

"So...you're not angry with me?"

I let out an annoyed sigh and started pacing. "I want to be. That's what's so maddening. I should be angry with you for what you're doing, but I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm afraid you might be right," I cried out in dismay. That admission hurt.

He gave me a crooked almost-smile, like he was sad for me but happy for himself.

"But I can't do anything about it," I clarified before he could get his hopes up. I wanted to, but the idea of going back to what I'd been—taking what wasn't mine, acting innocent so that no one would suspect me—it felt wrong, like slathering myself in mud when I'd worked so hard to be clean. He might not know my past. He might not understand my reasoning, but it wasn't just about the thieving, it was about all that those skills represented. "If Sir James and Princess Marilee were here..." I began, desperate to find a solution I could live with. "Even Falstone..." I crossed my arms, hugging myself as I tried not to let my frustration take over. "We can't even seek their counsel, much less their help. And even if we could get word to them, any correspondence would take weeks to get to Dalthia and then back to the capital. Plus, I'm almost certain that their absence is the *reason* Reeve is being so bold."

His brow twitched like he maybe hadn't thought of that.

"Is that crazy?" I asked, wondering if I was letting my imagination run away.

He shook his head slowly. "No. Not crazy at all." He blinked several times, like he was trying to pull things into focus. "In fact, I'm certain you're right." He was quiet, thinking hard for several moments before he looked at me again. "You could help us."

I turned away from him with a growl. It wasn't that simple. Not for me.

"You said yourself that I was right," he said from behind me.

I rubbed at my temples. "I said you *might* be right."

"You could help," he said again.

"And what would that accomplish?" I asked, finally turning to look at him. "They're not going to stop. Nothing you or I could do would make them stop."

"Which is why we *have* to do something," he said with conviction. "The burden they are inflicting isn't going to go away, but we can do something to relieve it. Why do you think I catch rabbits and birds and deliver them around the village? Why do you think I fight to return the goods that are stolen from the vendors? Why do you think I risk taking a pouch of money off a lawman's belt?" he asked in earnest. "It's because I can do some good with those things. I can relieve some suffering. I can put food back on the tables of those who otherwise wouldn't have enough. This tax is going to make every villager's life worse. Why do you think there are so many street children desperate enough to steal for Reeve? They need us to do *more*, not less."

Shame crashed over me. Shame that I had doubted him and disapproved. Shame that he had to point out something that should have been obvious. Shame that I knew what he was doing was right, and yet I also knew that I wouldn't be brave enough to help him.

I stepped close enough to set my hand on Rowan's chest, wishing that the gesture could be more than a conciliation. Wishing I had the right to be closer to him. Wishing he wanted me there. I looked up at him, prepared to speak, but the words blew away as soon as I saw the way he looked down at me.

Oh laws.

Was I imagining the heat in his eyes? Did he really slant toward me, leaning into my touch? Air whooshed from my lungs, but I fought to regain my composure and shove all those feelings and whatifs aside. "You're doing good work" was all I said as I ignored the thrumming pulse that beat between us. "I wish you the best of luck." Then I dropped my hand and walked away, clenching my fist around the warmth that lingered there.

"You're tense today."

Rowan's observation came from behind me. I'd been here at the range only two days ago, but that hadn't been for our usual lesson. So here I was, eager to learn.

Or rather trying to be eager to learn. Trying to care *at all* about archery when children were being turned into thieves and Rowan was more appealing by the day.

He was right. I was tense. Not just because of what was happening in the village but because of him. Whenever he was near, I was acutely aware of him. Laws, even when he wasn't near, I was aware of him. Thinking of him. Wanting to be near him.

Wanting to forget he was a thief.

I wanted. I wanted him. It felt stupid and silly to even think it, but it was true.

The ache I felt for him was similar to that aching hunger that had been a visiting companion throughout my childhood. And I was nearly as desperate to ease this hunger as I had been to ease that one. And the *wrongness* of that—of being so desperate for scraps of affection from someone who, logically, was all wrong for me—was torturous.

He set a hand on my shoulder and the warmth of it shot through me.

I wanted.

"Drop your shoulders. Stiffness will not yield good results," he advised.

I shut my eyes, trying not to hurt over the fact that I was aching for want of him while he was simply tutoring me in archery. *Stupid, silly romantic notions*.

I gave a swift shake of my head, trying to rid myself of the obsessive thoughts that insisted on clouding my mind.

He moved his hand to wrap it around my own where it held the bow, loosening my fingers until both the bow and arrow were removed from my grasp.

"I don't think I've ever seen you wound so tightly," he commented as he stood facing me, concern written in his eyes. "What's wrong?"

I scoffed. "What isn't wrong?" I asked darkly.

He gave me a sad smile. "Is it getting to you?"

"Yes." We were likely *not* referring to the same thing, but it didn't matter. I was being driven mad. He might as well know it.

"Knowing of someone's plight is never easy," he said, stepping back and setting my bow down before sitting on a large rock. "Feeling helpless to do anything about it is even worse."

I nodded, keeping my eyes from him so that I wouldn't stare.

He was a widower. He still mourned his wife. He could not possibly think of me in the same way I thought of him. He was a thief.

He was a thief.

A noble thief and a kind one, but did that matter?

Yes! My mind shouted. Yes, it mattered a great deal.

I cleared my throat, trying to focus my mind on less complicated matters. "What shall we work on today?"

"If you need to talk—"

I cut him off with a sharp shake of my head. "I want to practice. This is something I can control and improve." I held out my hand so that he could return my bow to me.

My hand hung there, empty and waiting while he studied me. I tried to look him in the eye, but I couldn't hold his gaze. I couldn't stare into the cool blue of his eyes without the want growing inside me.

He finally stood and came near enough to put the bow in my hand. I closed my fist around it and tried to pull it toward me, but he wouldn't let it go. And when I looked up at him with frustration, he stepped a little closer.

My lungs convulsed.

"If you ever do want to talk..." He reached out, pulling on one of my curls, stretching it out to its full length before letting it spring back into place. My ribs tightened. Then he returned his gaze to mine. "I'm here."

It was so simple, those two words. Such a simple phrase, but what he was offering didn't feel simple or trite. It was an offer of friendship. And maybe more. Possibly more, but certainly friendship at the least.

I managed a nod, ready to burst into flames where I stood, but then he took a step back and my mind cleared. I did admire Rowan, and the ache I felt to be near him was undeniable, but that did not mean that I should act on it. If I did and then ended up regretting it...whatever happened between us, I did not want to regret Rowan.

I saw the theft. The constable wasn't even trying to hide it. He simply picked up the pocket watch, gave the watchmaker a cruel smile, put it in his pocket and walked away.

"Sir," the watchmaker called after him. "Sir, you haven't paid for that!" The distress and helplessness in the old man's voice lit a fire in me and propelled me into motion. Nostrils flared and jaw tight, I moved through the crowd, positioning myself in line with where the constable would walk. I pulled up my hood and stared at the ground, partially to hide my face and partially to justify my planned clumsiness.

Then I "accidentally" bumped into him.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," I said, dipping my head and backing away in deference.

He just snorted and continued on his way. I moved back toward the watchmaker but was distracted by the sight of Rowan doing his best to hold Johnny in check, whispering fiercely into his ear, but Johnny shrugged out of his grasp and stalked toward me. Or, more accurately, toward the constable. It was clear he was going to do something rash and dangerous in retribution.

I stepped into Johnny's path and put a hand to his chest. "Don't bother," I said, opening my hand just enough that he could see the watch lying on my palm.

"What?" He looked past my shoulder at the constable retreating through the crowd before turning his eyes back to me. "How did you—"

The reality of what I'd just done slammed into me, and I shook my head as shame rolled down my back. I shoved the watch at Johnny before turning to walk away, leaving him standing stunned in my wake.

My heart thrummed in my throat and I put a hand to my mouth, unable to believe what had happened. The grab had been instinctual, and it had also been flawless. Hunter would be mortified. *I* was mortified—wasn't I?

On the one hand, I'd retrieved a stolen item. No one was worse off for what I'd done. Still, I hadn't utilized those particular skills in so many years that it was a little bit frightening just how naturally it had come back to me.

Rowan didn't catch up with me until I was stepping onto Sutton land. I heard the crunch of his hurried footsteps behind me and braced myself for what was to come.

"Do you want to tell me what that was about?" he asked as he came up alongside me.

"What?" I asked, looking over at him.

He gave me a don't-act-dumb look. "You got that watch back. Do you have any idea what that meant to the watchmaker?" he asked, his eyes bright. "That was his prized piece, his most expensive item. The loss would have devastated him."

"I'm glad he has it back," I said, my eyes straight ahead, my feet hurried.

"Miriam, do you have any idea how much you could help us? That lawman didn't even realize it was gone. You didn't cause a scene. No one was chasing you."

Yes, I did know how much I could help because I knew how good I was, but that fact had me panicking over the implications, so I kept walking until Rowan took hold of my arm.

"Miriam, please." He caught my gaze with his, but all I could do was stand there, knowing I was going to disappoint him. "You want to help us. I know you do. So what's stopping you?"

I shook my head and shrugged out of his grasp as I tried to dredge up all my good reasons. "The law?" I suggested. "Right and wrong?"

"Those aren't the same thing and I think you know that," he said gently.

I closed my eyes and let out a sigh. "Rowan..."

"Listen, I know it's scary. The idea of stepping outside the law. When you've obeyed the rules your entire life, it's terrifying—"

"That's just it," I interrupted, dropping my basket at my feet. "I haven't obeyed the rules my whole life." My voice shook with the admission. Apparently it was time for some honesty.

"The laws, then," he said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

"No, not those either." I took a step closer. "You assume I don't want to break the law because I never have before." I pulled in a breath of courage. "The *truth* is that I've broken the law more times than I can count." I swallowed and kept talking, determined to let him see the truth of who I was. "You think you're a thief? I'm a better one. You've been skirting the law for months. I stole from people without a moment's hesitation for *years*."

I could see the questions racing around in his head as he tried to make my words fit together with what he knew. Finally his expression cleared and his brow hitched up in realization. "Your father was a peddler," he said.

"Yes, and if there is such a thing as an honest peddler, I've never met one."

He mentally chewed on my words for a while, his brow pulled together in thought. "The way you retrieved that watch."

"It was instinct. I barely even had to think about it because I've done it a hundred times before." My throat tightened. "It came so naturally, and that is terrifying and humiliating," I confessed as my voice cracked and my face crumpled.

"Humiliating?" he asked, puzzled. "Why?"

"Why?" I asked in exasperation. "Why am I embarrassed that I stole from people for a living? How can I *not* be?"

"Because you survived! You were a child and that's how you survived." He looked strangely... proud at that moment. And hopeful. "Not only that but now you can use what you know for more than just helping yourself."

I bit my lips together, shaking my head. "I can't."

"But why? You can put those skills to good use." I could see the excitement in his eyes, the prospects he saw for what I could do for him.

I shook my head harder. "I don't want to be that person."

"What person?" He looked honestly clueless. "You would be helping people. Wouldn't it be good to take those skills that you were forced to use as a child and use them for something good?"

I frowned and backed away from him. "I know what you're doing."

His puzzlement was genuine. "What am I doing?"

"You're justifying something that you know is wrong. I don't want to do that!" My voice rose as the burden of the feelings I had wrapped around this subject convulsed and stretched inside me. "I don't want to be the kind of person who finds it so easy to pick a man's pocket that they don't even have to think about it." I turned away, but he put a staying hand on my arm.

"Do you honestly feel guilty about it?" he asked.

"Of course."

"But..." He was flummoxed. "That man has his watch back. You returned stolen goods."

"Through thievery."

I could tell he was trying to understand but couldn't. "I don't think it's the same."

"I do," I insisted.

He sighed through his nose. "There's a big difference between picking *anyone's* pocket you have access to and picking the pocket of a *corrupt lawman* who is stealing from the people he's sworn to protect." His face was so earnest.

He believed so deeply in the work he was doing that he was willing to risk it all—not for himself, but for others.

I don't know what made me do it—maybe it was the goodness I felt from him, maybe it was a natural consequence of the steady pull I'd been pushing away for weeks. Whatever it was, I reached out a hand and let my fingertips run over his cheek, feeling the stubble of his beard. "I admire you, you know."

His pupils went big and he swallowed. "You do?" he asked, a bit breathless as his eyes skated over my face.

With everything inside me, I wanted to bring myself just a little bit closer, to answer his words with my lips pressed to his. The feeling was so foreign and so powerful that it stole my breath. I wanted... but I couldn't. I couldn't fall into that trap. I couldn't fall into him. I'd spent the last seven years trying to be everything that was noble and good—trying to prove I was worthy of the life I had now. I could not entangle myself with a boy who admitted to being a thief, no matter how much I might wish to.

So I answered his question with nothing but a nod, and then I let my fingers drop.

He caught my hand. "Then why are you going away?"

I searched his eyes, wondering what he meant.

"Is admiration all you feel?" he asked.

I blanched at the question. It wasn't fair for him to ask me that. I pulled my hand away and stepped back. "I don't know what you mean."

His head tilted and there was a longing in his eyes that I'd never seen before. "Don't you?"

I shook my head. It was a refusal to myself as much as to him. I wouldn't try to answer that question. Not only because the answer was too big and confusing to put into words but also because he hadn't earned it.

The moments stretched and he finally seemed to realize I wouldn't be answering. "We are at least friends, aren't we?" he asked.

At least friends? "Yes," I answered. "I suppose we are."

He swallowed and slipped just a little closer to me. "Do you suppose we could ever be more?"

His words stole the air from my lungs. What was he suggesting? That *he* wanted more? A mass of hope welled up inside me and I wanted nothing more than to take hold of what he seemed to be offering. I wanted to cling to the idea that Rowan could feel for me even a portion of what I felt for him. Then my reason and logic took over and I pulled my gaze away from his, focusing on the trees around me as I stuffed my thoughts into order.

I took a breath, fixing my reasons in my mind before turning back to him again. "No," I breathed out, hating the word even as it left my lips.

He blinked and let out a little puff of air. "Why?" he asked.

"Because I picked the pocket of a lawman earlier today."

Confusion clouded his face. "What does that have to do with me?"

"Everything!" I lifted my empty hands, desperate to have him understand. "Everything inside of me is so mixed up. What I knew yesterday—what I believed about right and wrong—is so muddied that I cannot make sense of it. And it's because of you. If I let myself feel more, I'm afraid I will become something I *despise*."

My last words seemed to hit him like a slap to the face.

This time, he was the one to step back.

My heart sank at the hurt that twisted his features.

He turned away from me.

"Rowan," I called after him. "That is not what I meant."

He spun back around. "Then what did you mean?" he demanded in harsh tones. "How can I have misunderstood when you stated in plainness that feeling anything for me beyond friendship would make you *despise* yourself?" He held his hands out to his sides. "If that is the case, then I can only conclude that you must despise me as well."

"Not you, just—"

"Just everything I do? Everything I stand for?" he demanded.

"I never hid my feelings about what you do," I argued. "And if you truly did consider me a friend, then you wouldn't ask me to change myself."

"I'm not asking that."

"You are!" I insisted as the truth of my own words hit me. "I've told you over and over that thieving is wrong and I want no part of it, and you keep acting as if I'm in the wrong for believing it."

"I didn't—" He cut himself off, seeming to rein in his thoughts as he stared at the ground and let out a gusty breath. His brow furrowed and his mouth twisted to the side. The sounds of birds and my own breathing filled the air as he stood in thoughtful silence. He finally looked up at me again and there was apology in his eyes. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I pushed too hard." He ran a hand over his eyes and down his face. "I'm sure of my path, Miri. And maybe that made me believe it was the right path for you too."

I nodded my head, grateful and relieved that he seemed to understand. "I know what's right for me better than you do, Rowan."

His eyebrows jumped, my blunt words seeming to hit him with force. "Yes. You do." He chewed on the inside of his cheek, lost in thought for a moment. "So then, as a friend...can you tell me why?" "Why what?"

He lifted one shoulder. "You said you admire me, and that seems to include what I'm doing to help in the village, and yet..."

"I know it's hypocritical," I said, my words defensive.

"So explain it to me." I could tell he was frustrated but trying to be patient.

I huffed, annoyed with myself and the mess of logic that had brought me to this point. But if he truly wanted to know, then I wanted to help him understand. "Approving of what you do, helping you —doing it myself—would be a betrayal of my brother and everything he has done for me."

He squinted at me, perplexed. "We're talking about Hunter now?" His frustration was back. "Yes."

"He's the one dictating your actions?" He scoffed. "What happened to knowing for yourself what's best for you? How did he earn such blind loyalty?"

I bristled. "Because he is the only person who has ever loved me!" I shouted, angry not only because I had to explain but because it was true in the first place. My mother had died when I was a

baby. My father had seen me as a burden and a piece of merchandise. "And you—a man who has grown up with two parents and a continual sense of safety—do not get to lecture me about wanting to make my brother proud. He gave up everything! He did *everything* for me." I took several heaving breaths, trying to calm down. "And if he had not, I would have been worse off than Isabel the day you met her."

Silence rang between us and his anger seemed to dissipate as he looked at me with a focus I hadn't seen in him before. "What do you mean?"

"Hunter and I..." I moved my jaw back and forth as I tried to rein in the emotions that welled up with the memories. "We left our father when I was ten."

His eyes were soft and worried as he asked, "Why?"

I took a shallow breath in and slowly let it out as hot and cold sensations chased their way up my spine. "Because my brother refused to let my father sell me...to a man he met on the street." There. I'd said it. The words had been quiet and bleak, but I'd said them.

He blanched, his eyes blinking as if the words I'd spoken refused to make their way into his mind.

I curled one shoulder forward as my mouth twisted to the side. "My father was always looking for the next scheme, the next moneymaker. As soon as he had a few coins in his pocket, he would spend them, so it was an endless cycle of desperation and not enough. Never enough." My voice was tight and gravelly, but I was proud that it didn't break.

Rowan shifted closer, reaching out to lace his fingers with mine. But he didn't speak, just waited for my next words, his face painted with compassion.

"I thought I was doing my part to contribute," I said, taking comfort from the feeling of his hand enveloping mine. "I thought I was an asset. But I also thought he cared about me. In some way, on some level, I believed that my father held some sort of affection for me. But it was all a lie. He never did. He never cared for anyone but himself." I paused and swallowed, fighting against the lump in my throat and the pain in my chest. "I was a good little pickpocket, but I was also an expense. I took up food. I took up room in the wagon. I chattered too much."

"You were a child!" Rowan's fierce defense made my heart ache.

I shoved down the old, familiar hurt and shrugged. "That doesn't matter to a man like my father."

His face fell, the weight of my story dragging on him. He gave a little disbelieving shake of his head, the kind of gesture we all make when we don't want to believe in the awfulness of humanity, yet we can't deny it either. "You were just a child," he repeated in a whisper.

"Yes." I squeezed his hand, hoping he could understand. "And I had a big brother who loved me enough to build a new life for us. *That's* what Hunter saved me from. And to throw that back in his face by returning to the dishonest life that he pried us away from would be the worst kind of insult and ingratitude I can imagine."

His face was set in sympathy and he slowly nodded his head. "All right." He reached up and trailed one finger along my jaw. "I understand."

I swallowed and closed my eyes.

"I won't ask you to help me," he said. "Not anymore."

I opened my eyes to find him looking down at me, his face close.

He moved the tiniest bit closer. "But that doesn't mean we can't have..."

My gaze was drawn to his mouth. My whole being was drawn to it. It seemed imperative that I close the distance between us. "I really do admire you," I whispered, needing him to know that above all. "There's part of me that wishes I could help, but—"

"I know." He ran his fingers through the curls at the side of my neck. "And I admire you too." He

smiled softly down at me then eased away.

It tore at my heart and I felt the loss of his warmth immediately but I let him step back, knowing it was the right thing.

"I don't want to come between you and your brother. And clearly he would object to you helping us," he said.

My back tensed. "Most ardently. He'd be mortified if he found out what I did today. Maybe even irate."

"Well then." He bent to pick up my basket. "I suggest you don't tell him." He offered me his arm. My brow furrowed as I laid my hand on his forearm. "I've never kept anything from him before." "Nothing?" he asked, clearly surprised by my assertion.

I shook my head. "He's my best friend. I trust him with everything."

One eyebrow quirked up. "But you haven't told him about what me and the others are doing?" I looked away, realizing my statement had been untrue. "Not yet."

"So he doesn't know that I might be a thief?"

"I don't think there's any question of whether or not you're a thief," I pointed out, and I couldn't help the note of disappointment in my voice. "You are." This would all be so much easier if he weren't. But then...would he be the person I had come to admire if he weren't a reluctant thief?

"Does he know about the troubles in the village?" Rowan asked.

I let out a heavy sigh. "I told him, but he says he needs more information. Honestly, I don't think he wants to look too hard. He's put himself firmly on the side of the law for the past seven years. I'm sure the idea that the law could betray us all is even more disconcerting to him than to most."

"So he'll ignore it?" His tone was curious.

"I hope not, but maybe."

"Why?"

I thought on that, trying to gather my words. "Perhaps because he's seen enough darkness in his life, and he's not eager to go looking for more. Or maybe he just needs to believe that the law will prevail."

He sighed beside me. "We all want to believe that."

I loved the smell of bread dough. I loved the way it felt in my hands as I kneaded it smooth. It was only me in the kitchen, the only sounds coming from a bird perched in a tree just outside and my own humming.

I heard the door to my right open but kept my focus on what I was doing. Or at least I did until I felt the air shift and the back of my neck started to tingle. When I looked up, Rowan was standing there in the middle of the kitchen, his hands behind his back, his head tilted just a little as he looked at me.

A blush crawled up my cheeks and I didn't know why. I was making bread, which may very well be the most normal, unembarrassing thing in the world. So then why was I suddenly too warm?

Rowan smiled, and it wasn't cocky at all. "Good morning," he said in a tone that was almost hushed.

I swallowed. "Good morning." Who was I kidding? My embarrassment came from the fact that the last time I'd seen him, he'd been a breath away from kissing me, and that prospect was just as appealing now as it had been then.

He looked around the kitchen and it struck me that Rowan never came here. Despite the much more frequent interactions that he now had with me and the lads, he still kept close to his own home for meals.

"What can I do for you?" I asked, swiping the back of my wrist over my forehead.

His eyes returned to me and he gave a little shrug. "I just wanted to see where you spend so much of your time."

He had come here to see me. *Flattered* was too weak a word to describe the fluttering inside me. "Well, this is it." I looked around, trying to see it from his perspective. Objectively it was a rather cold space. Stone walls, metal pots and pans, wooden furniture. But it also had sunshine pouring through the windows and a sense of home that I'd never found anywhere else.

"You're a baker," he commented as he stepped up beside me.

"Among other things," I said, digging the heels of my hands back into the dough.

"Do you like what you do here?" he asked.

I nodded. "Working in a kitchen means I'm never hungry." And that meant the world to a beggarchild. "I also happen to love baking bread."

His head tilted again. "Why?"

"It's simple. Reliable. Filling," I answered as I breathed deep to take in the smell of the dough. "Emeline loves the delicate, complex recipes, but not me. They're finicky and complicated. They're bound to fail half the time. Simple and reliable bread—that's what I like."

"And what about people?" he asked as he moved to stand behind me, close enough that his chest bumped into my left shoulder. "Do you like simple, reliable people?"

My stomach tightened and I had to clear my throat. "Reliable, yes," I answered, having to remind myself to keep working the dough. "But I don't mind a bit of complexity in people. After all, I can hardly claim to be uncomplicated myself. I'm a tangled mess. Life makes us all complicated."

He moved to lean against the counter so that I could now see his face. "Can I ask you something without starting a fight?"

I took in a breath, preparing for whatever he had in mind. "I suppose that depends on the question." "You told me yesterday that you know what's right for you better than I do."

"Yes," I confirmed as I realized what he would ask next.

"Doesn't that apply to Hunter as well?" he asked gently. "Don't you know what's right for you better than he does?"

I continued to knead, the dough making a shushing noise as it moved over the flour-covered slab. His question didn't make me angry, but it did make me think for several moments before I came up with something I thought he would understand. I paused my work and looked up at him. "If you wanted to do something that you *knew* would disappoint Isabel"—I let that prospect sit for several beats—"would you still do it?"

His eyes widened and his mouth opened but no words came out. Eventually his expression settled and he nodded his understanding.

I gave a little shrug. "People are complicated."

"You're right. Thank you for explaining." He breathed deep and let it out in a relaxed sigh. "And thank you for letting me be complicated."

My mouth curved into a smile. It was such a strange thing for him to say, but somehow I knew what he meant.

I kept kneading and we both let the silence sit. It was lovely to just be in the silence with him. No challenge. No argument. No arrogance. Just a pleasant buzzing excitement because of his proximity.

"Tell me more about Isabel," I suggested. I knew that if I let this enjoyable tension continue, I would do something ridiculous, like suggesting we be more than friends. But if that was ever going to be a possibility, I needed to hear more about his life first. And it was clear that a large part of his life was Isabel.

He tilted his head. "You want to hear about her?"

"Certainly," I answered. "That's what friends do, isn't it?"

He searched my face for sincerity and when he found it, he pulled a stool over so that he could sit as he talked. He let out a wistful sigh then began. "Isabel had straight black hair, long and luxurious. Her complexion was dark and she had beautiful, piercing eyes." His words were calm, like there was a peace that came with describing her. "Those weeks that she lived on the streets—they hurt her. They made her hard and unyielding in some ways, but she was also fragile and needy in other ways. She would cling to me one day and push me away the next. As a result, our friendship was...tumultuous." The corner of his mouth turned up a little. "At times I wanted to give up on it altogether, but I felt fiercely, *fiercely* protective of her. If I didn't know that she was safe and well, I couldn't sleep or concentrate."

The dynamics he described sounded difficult, and I wondered what had kept them together.

"So I kept going back to her, checking on her at the tailor's shop, making sure she had enough to eat. She softened after a time, once she'd learned to trust that I wasn't going anywhere." His face softened. "That's when I really fell in love with her."

"Because she trusted you?"

"Because she let me see who she really was." He fell silent for a moment, and I watched his face morph with thought and realization. "I suppose that's what this is about, isn't it?"

"What what's about?"

"You asking me these questions."

My brow furrowed. "I don't follow."

"You want to see who I really am. Hence the questions."

"I hadn't thought of it that way, but...yes, I suppose you're right. After I found out about Isabel, I certainly saw you in a different light. I felt I knew you better after you told me a bit about her." I gave a little shrug. "She's a part of you."

"And who is a part of you? Besides Hunter, of course." He smiled as he said it and it was clear that he understood.

"He took care of me for a long time," I said as I divided the dough into loaves.

"And your parents?" he asked carefully. "Are they a part of you?"

I swallowed, dreading this subject but wanting him to know. "Yes. My mother is a part of me. She's the bright red of my hair and the green of my eyes. I have no memory of her, but my father let me know that she'd given me those traits. And yes, my father is a part of me as well. He taught me to pick pockets. And then he shattered my trust," I said with a sad bob of my head. "And Hunter was the one who repaired it."

His face twisted in pain and confusion, no doubt remembering the darkness I referred to. "What makes people that way?" he asked. "What would make a father so willing to hurt and betray his daughter? I don't understand it. I don't understand that kind of greed. I don't."

I smiled softly. "And that is one of the things I appreciate about you. You have a good heart, Rowan."

I lapsed back into silence, and after a moment, he stood and lifted his hand to push my braid behind my shoulder. I froze, wondering what he would do next. But he just smiled and stood straight. "I have traps to set," he said in resignation. "Thank you for letting me visit you."

"You're welcome here anytime," I said, and I meant it. Having him here, in this place where I was comfortable and at ease, had been wonderful, profound even. Despite the ache I felt for more, it was good to know that we could still be friends, still confide in one another.

As I watched him go, I thought of the stories we'd told each other and I had to wonder, if I hadn't had Hunter, would I have ended up much like Isabel? Desperate for love but determined to push it away, lest it be snatched from my fingers?

I always enjoyed sitting down with Hunter and Emeline for our evening meal. It left me feeling more grounded when I could participate in the routine. Tonight was a little different though. As I speared a bite of rabbit and put it in my mouth, I couldn't help but notice the empty chair beside me, and the vacancy left me discontent. I wanted Rowan to be here. I wanted to trust that he had a desire to be here as well. I wanted more of the connection we'd shared over past hurts and our brave future, more of the comfort we'd found yesterday in the simplicity of just standing in this kitchen. I wanted more of him. I shouldn't, but I did.

"That was wonderful, Emeline," I said as I stood. "You always know how to season a rabbit just right."

"Yes. We're lucky to have quality meat aplenty here. In fact," she said with a lift of her voice, "I've heard stories of villagers finding fresh meat at their door when they go out in the morning."

I paused for just a moment. "Really?" I set my plate and utensils in the washbasin.

"Yes. It seems someone has taken it upon themselves to feed those who are less fortunate." I thought I might have heard a note of pride in her voice.

"Those families are likely being hurt by the magistrate and his constables," I pointed out, unable to resist reminding my brother that there were problems he was ignoring and burdens I longed to ease.

"I'm grateful someone is looking out for those in need. But I have to wonder, where do you suppose they get the meat?" Hunter asked.

I raised an eyebrow at him. "Does it matter? Hungry people are being fed."

"I think it does," he answered. "When animals are disappearing from the duke's land and then showing up on the villagers' doorsteps, it matters. If the meat being left for them is actually stolen, then whoever is attempting to help these people is actually making them complicit in their crimes."

"Crimes that Mr. Kenton has yet to report," I pointed out. "Crimes that the lawmen don't care about. It's not as if Magistrate Reeve is going to take one look at a dead pheasant and say, 'See there, that's from the duke's land.""

"Whether they can be caught and punished or not, it's still poaching. It's still against the law."

I just shrugged, picked up the basin of dirty dishes and took it outside.

He followed after me. "What about what Johnny and the others are doing in the village?"

I froze, surprised that he knew who to blame. It took me a moment to remind my body that I needed to turn and face him.

When I did, he looked sad and disappointed. "I'm not a fool, Miri. With the princess and Sir James gone, there's less work; everyone is taking it easy or working on projects they never had time for before. But Johnny? Rowan? Oliver? I see them running off to the village on market days and they don't come back with anything." He spread his arms out. "I see them talking, I hear the way they shush each other when I come too close. And your face right now tells me that I'm right."

Well, blast. My face and I had just betrayed Rowan and his merry band of misfits. Accidentally, yes, but still. I could have tried to deny it, claim no knowledge of any such thing, but it was clear he already knew, and I didn't want to lie to Hunter.

"How long have you known?" I asked, setting the basin down.

"A while. I was waiting for you to tell me about it, but you never did." He frowned. "That's not like you."

Shame rose up, knowing that I'd purposely kept something from him, but indignation was quick to follow, and I defended my decision. "I tried to tell you. I told you what was happening in the village. I told you I was worried. I told you it was wrong—and it is!" I insisted, trying to hold on to my courage as I stood up to my brother.

"I agree it's concerning and unfair—"

"And those boys are helping!" I insisted. "They're righting a wrong."

He shook his head in disappointment. "Don't do that. Don't justify it. That's exactly what our father did. 'We worked hard. We deserved more than what we got,' he would say. But even if that's true, it doesn't mean that stealing from others was right. What if that was their last coin? What if the money we took from their pockets meant they couldn't feed their children?"

"I know all this," I asserted, having gone over these arguments over and over in my own mind for the past weeks. "But it's different, what they're doing."

"It's not," he said with calm surety.

"They're stealing back what's being stolen from others. Isn't that *justice*?" I asked, desperate for him to at least understand my perspective. "Those boys only take from the lawmen who should be *enforcing* the law but are outright *stealing* instead."

"It's a problem. I know that and I'm not denying it—"

"You are denying it! If you know it's a problem and you don't do something about it, at what point are you complicit?" I asked.

He looked bewildered. "So now it's my fault that the magistrate isn't a pillar of virtue?"

"He's corrupt, Hunter," I said, my voice low and strong. "Don't dress it up and try to make it look nice. Don't diminish it. Don't *justify* it," I said, purposefully throwing the word back at him. "Just because the magistrate hasn't come here demanding money that we don't have doesn't mean it's not happening to others. It's abuse!" I said, knowing the truth of it and letting my anger seep through. "It's lawlessness. Someone has to help, and they are," I defended, jabbing a finger away from the house. "They're doing a good thing."

"And the poaching?" he asked. "Did someone steal those animals and let them loose on the duke's property? Poaching isn't returning someone's stolen goods; it's simple theft."

I rolled my eyes. "There are plenty of animals; they might as well be used for some good."

He rocked back a step, looking at me like he didn't recognize me. "Do you hear yourself? Maybe you really are turning into our father."

I sucked in a breath through my nose, but it got stuck, frozen in my chest. I couldn't breathe. No other words could have hurt me as deeply as those did. I blinked at the stinging in my eyes, stunned by the blow he'd just dealt me. I finally released my breath in a pained huff.

Hunter's face crumpled and his shoulders slumped. "I'm sorry, Miri." He reached out. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean that. I just—"

I jerked away from his hand and stepped back to put more distance between us. "How dare you." The words came out in a bare whisper.

"I only meant that he used the same kinds of justification."

"Then say *that*," I spat, my voice rising and shaking with rage. "Say *those* words. But do not act as if justifying the theft of a few animals to feed starving families is the same thing as my father trying to *sell* me for the cost of a meal or two!"

I heard his sharp intake of breath as he stepped back, his face going ashen. He opened his mouth but only a choking sound came out.

"I know that's what the meeting was that night," I yelled, though my throat was clogged with tears. "I didn't realize at the time what it meant, but it stuck in my mind. Sometimes I thought I had dreamed it. Other times I thought I'd made it up, but after a few years I figured out what those negotiations meant." All of the horror and worthlessness that was wrapped around that knowledge rose up, threatening to strangle me, but I pushed it down. "So don't you dare tell me that I am *anything* like that man!"

He swallowed, looking ready to weep. "I'm sorry," he choked out. I didn't know if he was apologizing for his awful words or for what my father had almost done to me.

Either way, his words made my anger dissipate, and I heaved a shaky breath.

Hunter just stared at me, shaking his head over and over—tiny little shakes as his throat worked. "I never wanted you to know that."

"I know," I said as an overwhelming wave of love for my brother washed over me.

"All this time, I've taken solace in the fact that at least you didn't know." A tear streaked down his face.

"Believe me. I wish I'd never worked it out," I admitted as my chest tightened and I wept in earnest. "And I know you were trying to protect me, I do. But in the end, it just made me feel alone in it. I thought I needed to protect you from knowing that I knew. Instead of being together in it, we were both alone."

He reached out and pulled me into a hug. "I'm sorry," he murmured into my hair. "I'm so sorry you had to know."

I burrowed into his embrace, sobbing into his chest, completely overwhelmed but also grateful to

have finally spoken those words to him, to finally share the burden. We cried together for several minutes before I collected myself enough to say, "Thank you for taking care of me all these years. I know it wasn't easy."

"I just want to keep you safe."

"I know."

"Do you?" he asked, those two small words filled with concern. "Because the time you're spending with Rowan and the others—what if you find yourself mixed up with that?"

"Hunter," I said gently, pulling away from him and wiping my face. "I want to help them."

"No, Miri," he insisted.

"I already have." The admission was quiet.

He looked dumbstruck. "What do you mean you already have?"

I took a deep breath, preparing myself for this next admission. "A constable took a pocket watch from the watchmaker. It was beautiful, expensive, and he just picked it up and put it in his pocket. It made me so angry, so I just..." I deflated as I tried to shake off the shame.

"You what?"

I gave a little shrug. "I bumped into him. I pulled the watch from his pocket. We gave it back to the watchmaker."

He took a step back, shaking his head.

"I was mortified at first. I was." I sniffed. "I hated how easy it was for me. I felt awful because it felt like betraying you, but then I realized it's not about you." I nearly started crying again with those words, but I swallowed it down. "And it's not about me. It's about helping these people. They need help, Hunter, and *I can help them*."

He thought for several long moments, his hand rubbing against one side of his jaw. "It's a slippery slope, Miri. This seems like justice, so you decide you are above the law and you bend the rules for yourself. And then you bend another rule, break another law. Do you have any idea just how difficult it was for me to stop stealing when we left Father?"

My chin pulled back in surprise because no, I hadn't known. "It was?"

"Of course it was," he said with feeling. "I'd never made an honest living before, and suddenly I was in charge of feeding myself and my sister. It would have been so much easier to just take a few things. We were hungry—you were hungry. It was so hard and I slipped up sometimes," he admitted quietly. "Sometimes it was too hard and I went back to what I knew. So I understand giving in to your instincts. But making the conscious choice *not* to do something you know is wrong...that's what makes us who we are," he said, thumping his middle finger over his heart.

I swallowed. We'd never talked about this before. He'd never suggested that it was difficult for him to quit stealing. From my ten-year-old perspective, it had looked easy.

"It might have been the right thing this time," he conceded, "giving the watch back. But what happens when the next thing comes along? Do you justify hurting someone? Do you tell yourself you have the right to someone's crops? Someone's animals? Where does it stop?"

I gave a sad lift of my shoulders. "You'll just have to trust that I know right from wrong." And I would have to be sure that I didn't fall into the trap of justifying more and more—taking because I could instead of taking because I was righting a wrong.

His shoulders sank. "I do trust you."

"Then try to remember that, even if you disagree with me."

I could tell he wanted to give me what I asked, but his rigid morality wouldn't let him.

"Hunter?" Emeline said.

We both turned to where Emeline stood beside the door. "Are you really going to condemn your sister for trying to help people who need it?"

His shoulders sank. "You know I don't object to helping people. Of course we should all help people, but when you're going up against the law..."

"Bending rules, defying authority," Emeline said gently. "Does that sound like anyone you know?" Hunter let out a great sigh.

"You hid Miri away in your room when she was sick," Emeline pointed out. "We both stole from the kitchens to feed her. Was that wrong?"

He didn't have a response for that.

Emeline continued to speak quietly from the doorway. "You don't want to be like your father, and for good reason. But your father never lifted a finger for anyone but himself."

Hunter crossed to his wife and pulled her to his chest, bending to place a kiss on her head. "You're right."

"I usually am."

He smiled down at her and then turned to me, his face morphing from unsure to determined. "Be safe," he finally said to me. "Be smart. Ask me for help if you need it."

I grinned and crossed to him. "You know I will." I threw my arms around his waist and squeezed. "Thank you, Hunter."

"You're welcome." He returned my squeeze and then let go. "Now if you'll excuse me, I need to go exercise a horse," he said, wiping at his face before giving us both a wave and heading to the stables.

"What he really means is that he needs to talk with a creature who won't argue with him," Emeline said.

I shrugged. "I don't mean to be argumentative."

"I was talking about me," she said with a proud smile.

I studied my brother's wife, the girl who had found me on the verge of death. The girl who had agreed to teach me to wield a sword before I realized my love of archery. She'd looked out for me, taken care of everyone who came through her kitchen, protected those who needed it. My brow furrowed. "How is it that you aren't anxious to join me? I would have expected you to be the first to take up the cause."

Her smile was genuine, even though I sensed some disappointment from her. "I'm afraid this is a battle I'll have to let the rest of you fight."

It was then that I realized the way she stood. How her hand rested against her abdomen. How she looked more content than I'd ever seen her. *Was she...?* But I kept the thought to myself. If Emeline was expecting, I knew Hunter would want to be the one to tell me.

"But," she said, "I'm more than happy to advise in any way I can."

I knelt down beside the basin of dishes and started scrubbing. "I'm happy to help Rowan with his ideas, but I can't help but think there is a better solution. If the duke only knew..." But I couldn't write, and even if I could, the duke was never going to listen to someone like me. "Couldn't we ask Beatrice to write to Her Highness? Princess Marilee has status and influence. If she were to contact the duke, perhaps he would do something or send the high magistrate to look into things."

I turned to Emeline, expecting her to think the idea was a good one, but she only looked sadly skeptical. "I doubt any letter from Her Highness would receive a positive response from the duke."

"Why not?" I asked in dismay. "She's a royal. She was married to their son, wasn't she?"

She gave a solemn nod. "Exactly. And you know that marriage was not a good one."

"Yes, but would they really hold that against her?" After all, there were plenty of marriages that

were less than ideal.

She gave a sad smile. "Princess Marilee didn't even attend her husband's funeral."

My eyes widened in surprise. Such things were *not done*. The insult of such an action... "Oh dear...I didn't realize..."

"As I said, I have no faith at all that a plea from Marilee would garner a sympathetic response."

I cast about for another idea. "Does Sir James have enough status?"

Emeline shook her head. "Sir James and the duke's eldest son, Edmund, were childhood rivals. There is continued animosity between them."

I stopped scrubbing and slumped down on the ground. "Well, what good is it to be working for powerful people if they don't have any power?"

"Miri," Emeline scolded.

"I'm sorry. You know I don't mean it. And I know the only reason the magistrate has left us alone here is because he doesn't dare harass the servants of a princess."

Emeline smirked. "No one wants to antagonize Dalthia."

"Could the Bridgefield servants write a letter? Surely a message from the housekeeper or butler would at least be read."

"You can ask, but I wouldn't get your hopes up." She gave an apologetic shrug before returning to the kitchen.

I wasn't ready to give up, though. There had to be a solution, or at the very least, there was more we could do.

After I'd finished with my chores, I walked swiftly toward Rowan's cottage. It was time for me to stop straddling the line and pick a side.

I was on Rowan's side. I was on Johnny and Oliver and Tyson and Ansel and Gretchen's side. I was on the side of those who were being crushed by the unlawful conduct of the magistrate and his men.

And it was time I let everyone know.

I marched up to Rowan's door and raised my hand to knock, but the sound of voices from around the back of the house made me pause. I couldn't make out very many specific words because several voices seemed to all be talking over one another.

I dropped my hand and walked around the outside of the cottage, following the cacophony of voices past the herb garden and into the trees.

Rowan, Johnny, Gretchen, Ansel, Tyson, and Oliver were gathered near the archery range. Ansel and Gretchen sat shoulder to shoulder, their backs up against a trunk. Johnny leaned on his staff, arguing with Rowan, who was crouched down, drawing in the dirt with the tip of an arrow. Tyson and Oliver looked on from where they stood just behind Rowan.

"I still think it's best to go in at night. We need the cover of darkness," Rowan said.

"Darkness won't do us any good if they catch us inside," Johnny pointed out. "We should go in when we know he's gone."

"In broad daylight?" Rowan asked, flabbergasted.

"It's worked for us before," Johnny countered.

"Hi, Miriam." Ansel waved at me.

His greeting caught everyone's attention. Rowan stood, sweeping his foot over the drawing he'd been doing. Johnny looked me over, apprehensive, then gave me a nod. "Morning, Miri."

I didn't know what to say. Should I just ask them outright what they were doing? "I just came to speak with Rowan," I said, since that was the bare truth of the matter.

Rowan immediately jogged toward me, taking my arm and pulling me away from the rest of the group.

A hissed whisper from Gretchen followed in our wake. "We're going to be in so much trouble."

Rowan led me to the other side of the cottage, out of hearing range and out of view of the others. "What did you need to speak with me about?" he asked, looking nervous beneath his usual confident air.

I studied him for a moment, remembering my determination—that I'd picked a side, that I'd chosen to trust him. So I took a leap of faith and asked him a question that I prayed he would answer honestly.

"What are you doing?" I asked, gesturing toward the group.

He looked behind his shoulder, even though the cottage blocked our view of the others, and when he looked back at me, there was a portion of defeat in his expression but also determination. "We're planning something dangerous," he said.

Odd that such a pronouncement should make me relax. He was telling me the truth, and somehow in the moment, that was the most important thing to me. "What kind of danger?" I asked.

He paused, seeming to note my lack of anger or worry, then took a breath and answered. "We need more information," he said, his hands gesturing in front of him as he went on to explain. "We know things are being stolen. We see things being stolen. But we also know that things have disappeared without any witnesses. Then there are the taxes being collected. The sum total of all that has been taken is significant. So where is all that money going?"

I didn't have any idea, so I just waited for him to continue.

"As far as we can tell," he said, seeming to warm to the subject, "it's not being spent. So then is it being sent to someone?"

"You think Reeve is working for someone else?" I guessed.

"No." He shook his head but his eyes were bright with intrigue. "My personal opinion is that he's in charge. However, I can't discount the possibility that he could be working for someone else."

I thought on that for a moment. "If it's being sent elsewhere, we'll never get it back," I pointed out.

"Which is why I'm hoping that Reeve is controlling enough and greedy enough to just keep it all to himself."

The gears in my head turned for several seconds before clicking into place. "You hope he's stockpiling it somewhere?" I guessed.

"Yes."

"Where does he live?"

"Just off High Street, by the parsonage. And we've heard rumors. The carpenter has delivered two large trunks to the magistrate over the past few months. Custom orders, with locks." The look in his eyes was so hopeful. "Miri?" The way he said my name was a question and a hope all in one.

I wrapped myself in bravery and looked him in the eye. "I want to help."

A bright wide grin lit up his face. "Are you sure?"

I nodded. "I can't sit back and hope it gets better. I have to do something about it."

He let out a gusty sigh and gave me a giant bear hug. "Thank you." Then he released me. "Are you certain?" He made a study of my face. "I don't want you to regret this."

I shook my head. "I won't. I know what's right for me."

He squeezed my hands then leaned in to place a quick kiss to my cheek, grinning when he pulled back. But when he saw me blinking up at him in surprise, his grin slackened and his eyes went dark. His entire face transformed into something sweet and tender and intense all at once. "You really are amazing," he said, then gave my hands one more squeeze and stepped back.

I shook off my shock. It was just a kiss on the cheek. Friends could kiss each other's cheeks, right? I cleared my throat. "I'm not amazing." Arguing was easier than basking in the glow of whatever *that* had been.

He shrugged. "I respectfully disagree," he said before he turned and towed me back toward the group. "Come. You can help us plan."

I smiled as I hurried to keep up with him, my heart racing with nerves and excitement. As we approached the others, I was washed with a different feeling. One of family and purpose. It would seem I'd just joined a band of outlaws. And it felt good.

When we drew closer, Johnny grinned. "Are you one of us now?" he called out to me.

I nodded. "Sorry it took me so long."

Johnny gave a shrug. "It's not something to enter into lightly."

That was very true and the thought drew my eyes to Gretchen and Ansel, but before I could voice

any concerns, Rowan spoke close to my ear. "Don't worry. Gretchen and Ansel never do anything illegal. They help, but only in ways that won't risk them getting into trouble."

I nodded, relieved. I would not have been able to countenance using children for illegal activities, no matter how much they may have wanted to help, no matter how much we believed we were right. At twelve, they probably didn't think of themselves as children, but they weren't old enough to realize the consequences of what we were embarking upon. Not when it was this big.

"So," I asked, "what is the plan? Are we going to break into the magistrate's house?" I teased.

They each looked at each other, communicating without words, looking uncomfortable.

Realization hit me. "Oh. You are going to break in."

Rowan gave an apologetic shrug. "It's the only way that we can know for sure if and where he's keeping the goods and money."

"And how will you keep from getting caught?" I asked.

"We were just discussing that," he said, drawing me fully into the circle and crouching on the ground again. "We can't decide if it would be better to go in during the day, perhaps even during market hours when we *know* he won't be there. Or if we should go in the middle of the night and count on the dark to conceal us." He drew several intersecting lines in the dirt with his arrow.

"It's a shame we can't guarantee that he'd be gone after dark," Johnny lamented.

"Or can we?" This question came from Tyson. We all turned to look at him. He shrugged. "He's the law. If someone breaks the law, he has to investigate, right?"

"So, you want to break the law somewhere else to hide the fact that we're going to break the law by breaking into his house?" Rowan clarified.

"It's just an idea," Tyson said.

"And it's not completely crazy," Johnny pointed out. "We don't even have to truly break the law. There are people on our side. They could claim theft or assault without us even having to be in the vicinity."

"But will he investigate in the middle of the night?" I asked. "Or would he wait til morning? Or would he send his men instead?"

Rowan heaved a sigh. "Too many variables. I think we have to go in during the day when we know for certain that he'll be gone."

"And his servants?" I asked.

Johnny and Tyson looked at each other. "Does he have servants?" Johnny asked. "He came from the working class."

We all looked at each other, waiting for someone to have an answer. "I don't know," I finally admitted. "But it's something we'll need to find out. It won't do any good to sneak in when he's gone if he has a maid or a manservant about the house."

Everyone nodded.

"How are we going to keep from being recognized?" Tyson asked.

"Our first objective should be not to let anyone see us," Rowan answered. "But we should also wear hooded cloaks."

I nodded. "Those will shield our faces as well as hide our shape and the state of our clothing. But you must resist any inclination to creep about and look as if you are trying to be sneaky. If we are seen, we have to appear as though we are completely comfortable with where we are and why."

The others started chattering amongst themselves, and while I tried to follow the conversation, I was distracted when Rowan spoke low in my ear. "You have a brilliant mind for details and planning."

I looked up at him in surprise. "Do I?"

He nodded. "You ask the questions that need to be asked."

I gave him a wry smile, fighting my way past my nerves. "I hope I can be of some use. I'm not skilled enough with a bow to help in that way."

"Are you kidding me? You're the only practiced thief among us."

His statement was correct, and it took me a moment to decide how I felt about it. I'd been ashamed of my past for so long that I had to consciously decide that such a description didn't have to be a bad thing. I had a skill set that could help, and as that idea sank in, a plan started to take shape in my mind. We all needed to lean into our strengths, and *my* strength was going unobserved and unnoticed.

I should not have been so calm. Walking down High Street with the intent of robbing the house of the magistrate should not have made me calm.

Old habits are hard to shake, and this was habit.

Oliver and John were already in position across the street from Reeve's home. Though Tyson had been unable to come with us today, he had been the one to come two days ago, watching Reeve's dwelling for any sign of servants. There had been none. Oliver was sitting slumped against a building, looking for all the world like he was a napping urchin, his cloak pulled tight around him and his hood covering his face. John was leaning on his staff, looking at the display of leather items hanging outside the tannery. It was odd to think of him as John, but after sitting in on the group's planning and hearing Rowan call him that so many times, it had stuck.

I slipped into the space between Reeve's home and the tavern next to it. Rowan waited for me there, having already pried Reeve's window open. I stepped into his laced hands and allowed him to boost me up and through the window. He followed quickly and quietly behind me.

We crouched down, scanning our surroundings. It wasn't a large dwelling, and we had entered what must have been the only bedchamber. There was an open door leading to the combined living area and kitchen. Inside the chamber was a bed, a side table, a chair in the corner, a single wardrobe, and two large trunks that took up nearly an entire wall.

They were enormous. When I'd heard that Reeve had commissioned trunks, I'd imagined small traveling trunks, not these monstrosities. If they did in fact contain the stolen goods of the villagers, there was no way we could reclaim the goods by walking out with the trunks.

I cast that thought aside. Retrieval would have to be done at a different time. Our objective today was simply to ascertain whether or not Reeve was keeping his hoard here.

Rowan crossed to one of the trunks and tried to lift one side. After several moments of strained silence, he gave up, shaking his head.

I stepped in, pulling several pins from my hair. I slipped them into the large lock that secured the trunk and worked them carefully around, moving one then the other until the mechanism inside clicked and the lock yielded.

I grinned and quickly removed it. Rowan was there by my side. "Like I said. Amazing."

I looked over at him and he gave me a wink before helping me lift the lid.

"Laws," I breathed in awe, reaching out a hand to touch the mound of coins and valuables that filled the trunk.

A gasp sounded behind us.

I looked in the direction of the gasp and saw a young maid standing in the doorway, staring at us, her eyes wide. Rowan jumped to his feet as she dropped the rag she'd been holding, her mouth wide open, ready to scream. Rowan clamped a hand over her mouth and maneuvered her toward the

wardrobe, which he opened and quickly stuffed her inside.

I shook off my surprise and went to grab the chair, dragging it over to block the wardrobe's door, but there was no blocking the sound of her shouts.

We rushed to the window. "I thought there was no maid," I lamented.

"She must be new," Rowan said.

"Why didn't you stick a rag in her mouth?" I hissed as I threw one leg over the sill.

"Because I've never shoved anyone into a wardrobe before! Run. I'll follow."

I trusted that he would do just that and didn't look back as I made my way around the house. I stepped into the lane, doing my best to appear as though I was a servant with places to be and no time to spare.

I brushed past someone in my hurry and my hood fell from my head. I tugged it back into place and kept walking, confident that the boys would follow me without appearing as if they were following me.

A commotion erupted behind me, and the maid's frantic shouts of "Thieves! Thieves!" forced me to pick up my pace. I started to run past the parsonage, but the side door creaked open and a voice hissed from the darkness beyond. "This way!"

I didn't have time to debate. My instinct told me to trust the offer, so I did. I ran toward the door, Rowan and the others following close behind. We slipped inside, one after the other, the door closing as soon as Oliver was inside.

The only light came from small windows high up in the walls. There were no candles lit, so all I could make out of our rescuer were the robes of a parson.

"Follow me," he said, leading us through the little chapel and into the back rooms that served as his home.

"Why are you helping us?" I had to ask.

"My parishioners confide in me. They tell me their troubles. I've heard stories of the magistrate's corruption and greed. I've also heard stories of a band of do-gooders who are fighting back." He reached the rear door and put a hand to it before turning to look at each of us. "I know right from wrong. And the magistrate is wrong."

His words reverberated in my mind and heart, giving me courage, reassuring me that my path was the right one.

A pounding came from the front of the parsonage, making me jump.

"Father Tucker!" someone shouted. "Open the door!"

"I'll stall them as long as I can, but it won't be long. Run." He opened the back door.

We didn't pause for thanks or goodbyes. We did as he said and ran, grateful that the parsonage bordered the forest. I thought perhaps we would make a clean getaway, but when I glanced back, I saw one of the constables burst from the back door of Father Tucker's home.

I ran faster, my heart hammering against my ribs.

"There! In the trees!"

As I crashed through Murrwood Forest, my skirts held out of my way, I wondered how it had all gone so wrong. Everything had been going so smoothly. How had we missed that there was a servant in the house? I didn't know and I couldn't worry about that right now because I had much more urgent problems to worry about, like how I and the others were going to outrun the constables.

John and Oliver were somewhere up ahead. Rowan was staying close by and I knew that I was slowing him down.

The constant shouts of "Halt!" and "You there!" continued to ring behind us as the constables fought to close the distance. I wouldn't be nearly as terrified by their pursuit if one of them didn't have a crossbow that he'd been using liberally.

"How much farther?" I huffed, knowing there was a certain spot they'd chosen where they believed we could hide. It had all been part of the plan. Hope for success. Plan for failure.

Rowan suddenly grabbed my arm and yanked me to the right just as an arrow flew by my left arm. Panic started to claw at my chest. "They're going to shoot us," I yelped. I'd run from angry men before, but none had ever *shot* at me.

"No, they're not," he said as he spun back, nocking and shooting his own arrow before turning back and cresting the hill with me. The other side was steep and covered in leafy vines. We both crouched to slide down. My right thigh was going to be bruised, I was sure of it.

All I could see below was a dry riverbed and then a steep incline on the other side. We'd never make it up the embankment in time but we had to try. I stumbled to my feet when we reached the bottom and headed for the other side but Rowan caught my hand.

"This way," he hissed in a whisper, pulling me along the hillside we'd just slid down. I was certain that the constables were going to reach the top of the rise and see us at any moment, but then Rowan stopped. He put his bow over his shoulder and grabbed a handful of the leafy vines that blanketed the incline beside us. He pulled them aside and urged me toward the gap he'd created. There was a crevice behind the vines and I scrambled inside, yanking on Rowan's hand to be sure he followed.

He folded himself into the space beside me, dropping the vines over the gap to conceal our position as we sat in the dim, earthy space. Then we waited, our breath huffing in and out, the sound somehow muted by the dirt around us but loud at the same time. Our breathing was too loud. Surely it would give us away.

Soon after, the shouts of the constables could be heard, calling to one another. Their confusion rang in their voices, and frustration made them louder. "Find them!" one finally screamed in anger. "Fan out and find them! I will not lose them. Not again!"

My heart pounded, worried they'd start looking behind every bush and boulder, but their footfalls and voices swiftly faded as they hurried in different directions, determined to track us down.

I let out a shuddering sigh and Rowan let out his own gusty breath of relief, then the shadow of him turned to look behind us. "John?" he called quietly.

No response came.

"I thought they would be here." He was worried.

"Do you think they were caught?"

"No." I felt him shake his head in the dark. "They were ahead of us. They must be coming from a different direction, taking a longer path."

My heartbeat sped again as I started to worry for the boys.

And then Rowan shifted beside me and I realized I was pressed into his side, my arms wrapped around his upper arm, my chin almost touching his shoulder.

His face turned toward me and his nose grazed my cheek.

My heart sped for a different reason.

I stilled, afraid to move. Any movement would mean something—a drawing away or a moving closer. A rejection or an invitation, but I couldn't make that decision right now. I couldn't—

Shouts sounded outside and my fingers clutched at Rowan's arm. They were still far away but near enough that it was clear they were retracing their path, hoping to find us. But we were well concealed. They wouldn't find us, I was sure. This was a haven, a safe place, a—

The vines pulled back and two bodies blocked the light.

My scream stuck in my throat, thankfully.

I could barely breathe as Oliver and John crammed themselves into the space, forcing Rowan and me to scramble back farther. I was surprised that we were able to make enough room without my back or head ever bumping into the earthen walls that surrounded us. How big was this space? Large enough to hold all four of us, apparently.

We all went still as the shouting voices rose and fell. They were clearly searching the area in a wider, more random pattern, which was good because they obviously hadn't seen where the boys had come to hide, but it was also nerve-racking as they seemed to be taking more time to search.

I tried to be calm, I did. I fought to slow my heart and my breathing but it was impossible. I knew too well how precarious our position was. Calm was outside my grasp.

Rowan's hand pressed into my knee, no doubt trying to comfort, but it only reminded me all over again of our proximity and the way we were squished in the dim space.

My heart never slowed, but eventually the voices faded away entirely, leaving us with nothing but the sound of our breathing.

"Are you both all right?" I asked after a long moment, my voice a mere wisp in the darkness.

They both shifted into more comfortable positions. "I'm well," Oliver answered.

"We all made it out in one piece," John answered, trying to sound light-hearted but failing. "That's something, at least."

"How did you all find this place anyway?" I asked, mostly in an attempt to distract myself.

"We didn't find it," Oliver answered. "We made it."

"You made it?"

"It was John's idea," Rowan said beside me. "This boulder above us is massive and it juts out into the ravine."

"I started digging under it one day," John said, taking up the story, "and realized the soil beneath was so rich that it was easy to move out. I've been working on it for months."

I touched my hand to the side of the crevice, feeling the packed dirt, then ran my hand up, extending my arm halfway before I encountered the rough rock surface that served as our roof. "When you said you knew a place to hide, I didn't expect this," I rambled. "What made you do it?"

"Not sure," John said as he settled his back against one of the walls. "Murrwood Forest always seemed like a haven, someplace I'd be able to take refuge if necessary. Then we started pushing up

against the law, and after being chased a few times, I decided that a true hiding place was a necessity."

"We're all grateful for John and his foresight, especially at this moment."

It was odd to hear a complete lack of confidence in Rowan's voice. Our flight from the village had shaken him. I reached out and found his hand, holding on to it with both of my own, not caring if he would read more or less into it than it meant. I just needed the reassurance. "How long do you think we should stay here?" I asked, in no hurry to face the world outside of this safe bubble.

"Let's give it a few more minutes," Rowan suggested.

We all gratefully agreed and settled into a silence filled with pounding hearts and breathing that needed to be calmed.

Once the boys deemed it safe to venture out, I did my best to square my shoulders and get on with it. But the thought of leaving our little hideaway caused my vulnerability to rise up, and I could feel myself starting to panic as Oliver and John crawled out between the vines. Rowan and I scooted forward, but when he tugged on my hand, urging me to step out into the world, I didn't move. I wasn't ready.

"You two go ahead," Rowan said when John leaned down to look in and see what the holdup was. "We should go back separately anyway," he claimed, but it felt like an excuse.

"Stay safe" was all John said before dropping the vines and leaving us.

There was a gap left in the vines that allowed some light to seep in, illuminating our surroundings.

Rowan didn't say anything right away. He just slipped his hand around mine. I looked over at him, and even in the muted light, I saw that his smile was barely there and too serious. After all our grand plans, this whole situation had brought us all back to earth. But there was something beneath the seriousness, something that suggested our hand-holding wasn't just for comfort. Or maybe that was just me hoping for something else in this moment besides the consequences of running for our lives.

Rowan still didn't say anything.

I had to swallow several times before I found my voice. "That was...close," I finally said, needing some sort of sound other than my heartbeat in my ears.

Rowan looked over at me, his expression dismayed. "John never should have given you that pouch of money in the market."

That seemed a strange thing to lament over at this moment. "Why?"

"We've dragged you into this."

I turned to face him fully. "No one drags me into anything. I wanted to help. What we are doing matters."

He didn't look convinced. "You didn't used to think so."

"I'm allowed to change my mind," I said, scooting back to lean against the dirt wall.

"Even after today?"

I thought about that. Today had been dangerous. It had been more than I'd bargained for and I was still feeling the effects of it. But we'd been right. Though we hadn't recovered even a coin of what had been stolen, we knew it was there. "Especially after today," I answered.

"I just—" This time he was the one to turn toward me, putting a hand on my bent knee.

The heat of his hand made my shoulder curl in.

His expression was more open and more torn than I'd ever seen it. "I just don't want anything to happen to you."

I swallowed and dredged up my bravery to ask the question, "Why?"

His shoulders fell. "I think you know why. And if you don't, then perhaps I haven't been plain

enough in my words."

My heart tried its best to jump out of my chest, but I breathed carefully and managed to speak. "We're friends." The declaration was nothing more than a whisper as I desperately wished for him to contradict me, to tell me we were more.

He moved closer, close enough that his leg bumped into mine and our feet fought for space. "Just friends?" he asked, his hand moving from my knee to rest on the ground so he could lean slowly closer, his eyes fixed intently on my own.

His unhurried pace gave me the opportunity to anticipate and ache. It gave my heart a chance to race ahead, anxious for the contact and eager for the heady experience it promised.

"No," I finally breathed, sitting forward just a little, and he eagerly closed the distance.

Rowan's lips settled against mine, soft and tentative as they explored the texture of my own with gentle brushes. I reached out a hand, timidly clutching the front of his shirt in an attempt to keep him close. A tremble ran through me as my soul sang that this was what I wanted. I'd wanted it for a long time, but I'd become so accustomed to resisting the need I felt to be closer to him that having that barrier removed was surreal. Beautiful. Unbelievable. Terrifying. But safe at the same time.

I sensed his restraint, felt the way his hand touched my side only to pull away. He was being so careful with me, and that only made me ache more.

When I felt on the verge of burning to ash, Rowan slowed and pulled back, leaving only one more chaste kiss on my cheek.

My heart thundered in my ears and I reluctantly relinquished my hold on him, but he scooted around so that he could sit at my side but with his body facing me, a hand around my waist, keeping me close.

He dipped his forehead and set it against my temple as we both tried to catch our breath.

"How did this happen?" I asked, my words coming out in a lament.

He pulled back, running his thumb over my cheek, turning my face to his so he could look at me. "How did what happen?"

"How did I fall for a thief?"

He gave me only a slightly apologetic smile. "If it makes you feel any better, I never thought I'd fall for a pickpocket."

My forehead thumped against his shoulder. "Former pickpocket," I corrected and felt the chuckle rumble through him, likely because we both knew I was falling back into the role.

His fingers curved around the back of my neck and his thumb stroked my throat a few times.

Laws, I wanted to kiss him again, but this hideaway was already burning with too much... everything. Heat and want. Panted breathing and runaway hearts.

"We should go," I said quietly past the lump in my throat.

"I know," he said as neither of us moved.

I filled my lungs with air all the way down to my belly, relishing the moment with a long exhale before raising my head. "Shall we?" I asked.

His smile transformed his face. There was something deeper and more beautiful in that smile. "Yes, we shall." He pressed a small kiss to my mouth then maneuvered himself to back out of our hiding spot before reaching a hand out to help me.

It took us a long time to make our way to the road. I hadn't realized just how deep into the forest we had run during our flight until we had to return home, but it wasn't a burden to walk with Rowan and have his hand laced with mine.

We walked in silence for a time. The fact that we'd just shared our first kiss sat heavy between us. Not uncomfortably heavy, just very...present. It made me want to know things. Things about him,

about his life, his feelings, his struggles.

"Tell me more about Isabel." Because when trying to tamp down the awkwardness of one heavy subject, why not bring up another?

He looked down at me with surprised eyebrows. "Are you certain you want to hear more about her?"

"Of course. Why wouldn't I?"

His brow furrowed in confusion as he searched for an answer. "I don't know." He stopped walking and turned toward me. "I suppose because she's another woman that I cared for."

"You think I should be jealous?" I asked, curious if that was the case. Maybe I should be jealous. Maybe I was a little bit. Maybe I should be wondering if he would compare me to her and if I would measure up.

"No. But..." He reached out almost like he was in a trance and took one of my red curls in hand, tucking it slowly and carefully behind my ear, making me shiver when his fingertips skimmed my neck. "I always assumed that I would need to leave Bel in my past if I were ever to move on and be with someone else."

His words caused a riot of hope and nerves to well up inside me. "Is that what you are? Are you with me?" It was what I wanted, but I was surprised to hear him say the words after only one kiss and with his wife's name so recently spoken between us.

His gaze left my hair and settled on my eyes. "That's entirely up to you. Do you wish to take a chance on a widower and a thief?"

One corner of my mouth curled up. "A thief seems like a good match for a pickpocket."

He chuckled at my answer, his fingers continuing to thread through my hair. "You've got incredible strength, do you know that?"

Tears suddenly stung my eyes and I reached up to place my hands on his cheeks. "And that is why I want to be with you," I said, then leaned forward and placed a soft, lingering kiss on his mouth, breathing him in. The fact that he saw my strength and trusted me was priceless. Hunter loved me and took care of me, but he still saw me as the little sister he needed to keep out of trouble.

Rowan stayed still, returning the pressure of my lips with his own, but he didn't reach for me, he just let that one simple kiss speak for itself.

When I drew back, he wrapped me in his arms and I leaned into his chest with a sigh. The sense of safety I found with him was...miraculous. I couldn't think of a better word for it. I'd only ever felt truly safe with Hunter, but this was different; it was so much *more*.

"What will your brother say?"

I pulled back to look at him. "About what? Us?"

"And what we're doing." He tried to smile but I could see his worry. "We did just get chased through the woods by the constables. Your brother is not going to like that."

I cringed at the thought of telling Hunter. This was exactly what he had warned me about. "He'll be worried," I admitted, dropping my eyes. "He'll worry that I'm in over my head and that I don't know what I'm doing." I raised my head so I could look Rowan in the eye when I said, "But I do know, and it was worth it."

He pulled me to him once again and kissed my hair. "I'll never forgive myself if you get hurt."

"I'm not going to get hurt. And yes, you would forgive yourself, because it's *my* choice." He released me and shrugged. "I haven't forgiven myself for Isabel."

My heart squeezed at the grief that flooded his eyes. At the same time, I marveled that he would equate his feelings toward me with his feelings toward his wife. Were they that strong? Or did he at

least think they might become so? "What do you mean?"

"When she died, she was helping someone," he clarified as we started walking again. "We both were, but it was at her insistence. There was a trader's horse and cart slipping off the side of the road. It was full of the trader's wares and we were all trying to save the merchandise and the horse. I wouldn't let her help with the wagon. I was too afraid it would slide down the hill and crush whoever was trying to save it."

He fell silent and I squeezed his hand, trying to keep him in the present.

"The trader and I were pushing on the side of the wagon, just in front of the wheel, doing our best to get it back onto the road while trying to be careful. Isabel was keeping hold of the horse, trying to keep it calm. When the wagon started to slide further, the trader and I jumped clear. But the cart was pulling the horse with it. I realized Isabel was trying frantically to unhitch it, save its life, but the cart was going too fast. The horse panicked, reared up, kicked out."

I closed my eyes, a tear slipping down my cheek, dreading what I knew came next.

"It kicked her in the head and she just dropped to the ground." His face pulled into folds of grief as he swallowed. "She didn't move again. I knew I was screaming, but I couldn't hear myself. I couldn't hear the horse's cries as it was pulled down into the ravine. I couldn't hear the trader's dismay. My memory of those moments is *silent*."

I stopped walking, unable to stand the tremble of his jaw and the way he stared ahead as if it was all playing out before his eyes. I stepped in front of him and wrapped my arms around his torso, fitting our bodies together and laying my head on his chest. I did my best to give him as much of my warmth and comfort and touch as I could, splaying my hands on his back, but not saying anything. Because nothing I could say would do any good. I couldn't make this better. I couldn't solve it or heal it or make it go away. It simply *was*. And I wanted him to know that the pain he carried didn't scare me, that I was here for it. That I was here for whatever he needed.

Our escape had been close. Too close. So uncomfortably close that we all took a step back. There was no more talk of breaking into the magistrate's home or trying to recover the collection of ill-gotten goods he had amassed there. The boys went back to what they'd been doing before, distracting the constables and helping those they stole from. I went back to what I knew—going to market as I usually did—but now I utilized more of the skills I had honed in my youth to assist Rowan and the others.

Two weeks passed, and we stayed in an odd state of uncertainty. We knew what we wanted to do, but we were too afraid to get it done. So we focused on the small things we could do to help. Rowan's traps did well catching small game on Sutton land as well as Bridgefield. I would help deliver the meat to those in need, sometimes coming upon families that were so desperate that every single member of the family would cry in relief at my pitiful offering of one small animal.

I was working in the kitchen, trying to finish so that I could find Rowan and hopefully make a real plan for how to take back what Reeve had stolen, when I heard a commotion outside. I looked out the window to discover that it was Hunter. He had clearly interrupted the training that John and the others were trying to participate in despite Falstone's absence. Not only had Hunter interrupted but he was yelling at John. What had gotten into him? He and John had always gotten along. John had been the one fighting by Hunter's side when Emeline was in trouble last year.

John was responding to Hunter's heated words, but he looked much more calm and in control, his staff resting in his hand. My face scrunched in concern as I watched Hunter step into John's space and then stick an accusatory finger in front of his nose. After pointing that same finger at Tyson then at Oliver, he walked away and straight toward the kitchen. He looked up and his blazing eyes caught mine through the window.

Laws. It seemed I was in trouble as well.

I wiped my hands on my apron, mentally preparing for battle with my brother. It wasn't as if I couldn't guess what this was about. My older brother was going to burst in here and try to save me. He couldn't help himself. Being solely responsible for your ten-year-old sister did something to a person, and it wasn't easy for him to let go.

I leaned back against the counter so that I was facing the door, ready for his ire when it walked in. The door burst open and he stepped inside, only to freeze when he saw me there, waiting. He'd likely expected and even wanted me to be regretful and ashamed. But I wasn't ashamed. His eyes fixed on mine and there were several fat seconds of silence wherein his shoulders fell and his chest deflated.

I spoke first. "Did you give John a good thrashing?"

He snorted and finally shut the door. "I couldn't thrash Johnny even if I wanted to," he said as he sank into a chair at the table and dragged a hand down his face. "What are you doing, Miri?"

"Helping people, same as John. Same as Rowan."

"You can't help people if you get yourself killed."

"I'm not going to get myself killed."

"Are you certain? Gretchen and Ansel were going on and on, telling the story of how you all *broke into the house of the magistrate*." His voice rose more and more with each word. "How you were nearly caught, how you had to dash through the forest with arrows and knives whistling past your ears."

"Ansel and Gretchen were not there, and it wasn't nearly that dramatic," I argued.

He raised his eyebrows and tilted his head at me, knowing I was stretching the truth.

I dipped my chin. "There were no knives whistling past our ears."

"And arrows?" he pressed.

I didn't answer.

"What were you all thinking? Breaking into someone's home?" He flung his arms wildly in the direction of the village. "The *magistrate's* home?"

"We were thinking we would find a hoard of valuables that the corrupt magistrate has squirreled away," I said defensively.

He sat back, folding his arms across his chest and giving me his best parental look. "And did you?" he asked, his tone mocking, clearly expecting the answer to be no.

"Yes," I said with calm confidence.

He opened his mouth, probably ready to launch into an I-told-you-so speech, but once my answer sank into his brain, he stopped himself, falling silent.

"Two large trunks, too heavy to carry."

He tilted his head, not wanting to believe what I was saying but knowing I wouldn't lie. "They could have been filled with anything."

"I picked the lock, Hunter. It was filled with coins and other valuables. No doubt the 'taxes' they've collected for all their hard *work*."

He stood and pushed his hands through his hair then said with disappointment dripping from his voice, "You picked the lock?"

I blanched, my jaw dropping. "That's what you're choosing to focus on? My lock-picking? Not the fact that the most trusted man in the village is robbing us all blind?" I asked, outraged.

"Of course"—he growled in frustration—"of course I'm upset about that. Of course it's wrong." He ran his hands through his hair, seeming to check himself before looking back to me. "Of course something should be done. But..." His eyes cast about, searching for the answer. "Does it have to be you? Haven't we risked enough? Haven't we walked that line *enough*?"

I smiled sadly as memories of that first year on our own bubbled up. The burden he had carried was something I couldn't imagine.

"I know something has to be done," he admitted quietly. "I just never wanted it to be you. I never wanted you to have a reason to pick a man's pocket or break into his house. You deserve to be more than that, Miri." I heard it in his voice then and knew his words were pure truth. This really wasn't about the theft, it was about me—about what he wanted for me. He was so desperate to protect me, to give me something that he felt our father had stolen from us.

"Maybe this is the way I can be more." I wanted to be more than what I'd been as a child—desperate and focused on my own survival. "As much as you want good things for me, I want good things for the people in the village. Those who are starving because of the greed of one man."

He took a deep breath, his face tense and tortured, not able to separate the right from the wrong. "How am I supposed to ever rest easy, knowing that you're putting yourself at risk?"

"You need to trust me."

He waved his hand through the air. "Of course I trust you."

"Do you?" I asked.

Suddenly his eyes settled on me, like he was surprised by my question. He studied my face for several seconds, his shoulders sinking. Then he closed his eyes. "I'm sorry, Miri. I never meant that I doubted you."

"And yet you do at every turn. How is it that you can trust your wife to protect herself, but you can't trust me?" I asked, a bit of hurt leaking into my words.

"I just..." He sank down onto the chair again. "I know what it was like to grow up the way we did. I know the habits we had to break. I know how much I struggled." He thumped a finger over his heart. "It's me I don't trust."

"How can you not trust yourself?" I asked in shock then crossed to where he sat and crouched in front of him. "You are the one who got us here. You are the one who built this life for us. If you happen to be a little stubborn and overprotective at times..." I shrugged. "That is a small price to pay."

He reached out and squeezed my hand. "It's just hard for me to know you are out there and I am here, unable to help."

Perhaps if he wanted to understand, if he was willing to rethink what he believed to be right and true..."If you're so worried, why don't you come along and help us?" I suggested gently.

He gave me a tender smile then stood, pulling me up with him. "I'm here for you, no matter what. You know that. But I can't take that risk. You're not the only person I'm responsible for."

I didn't point out that he really wasn't responsible for me anymore. I was fully grown and fully able to care for myself. But I doubted he'd ever see it that way. "I know you have Emeline to worry about, which is why you need to trust that I know what I'm doing. You don't have to save me, Hunter. I promise. You don't need to take any risk."

"I don't know that I could even if I wanted to. I'm too terrified of what would happen to Emeline and to..." He cut himself off, sniffing and looking at the ceiling.

"And what?" I prompted.

He looked back at me, his face coated in vulnerability. "And the baby."

I smiled through the angst of the moment, because how could I not? Yes, I'd suspected Emeline might be pregnant, but hearing the words from my brother lit a giant ball of joy in my chest. "You're going to be a father, Hunter?"

He nodded, unable to speak.

I wrapped him in a fierce hug. "You'll be a tremendous father. I know you will."

"My baby will need her aunt."

"You've decided it's going to be a girl then?" I teased.

He didn't answer, unwilling to be distracted from this worry.

"I'll be fine," I said as I pulled back to look at his face. "Rowan is watching out for me."

"I don't trust Rowan." Worry pulled on his face again. "He's too secretive and too arrogant and too..."

"Broken?"

My suggestion caught him off guard, and he looked at me with a question in his eyes.

I crossed back to the counter and leaned against it. "He has good reason for being the way he is. He's fighting against his own past."

"Broken people have no business trying to take care of others."

I gave him a look. "You mean the way my very broken older brother took care of me—practically raised me?"

"It's not the same."

"Of course it's not, because we're all different," I reminded him. "Just because Rowan battles his demons in a different way than you do doesn't make him less capable."

"I'm not worried about his capabilities; I'm worried about his recklessness."

"If you think he's reckless, you don't know him well," I said with confidence. "Rowan is bold, certainly, but I don't think I've ever seen him be truly reckless."

He finally let out a gusty sigh. "You're being careful?"

"Always."

He shook his head, hating what I was doing but unable to stop me. Then he crossed the floor and wrapped me in another hug. "I can't lose you, Miri."

"You won't."

"And I'll kill Rowan if something happens to you."

"No, you won't."

He grumbled something unintelligible then let go.

"You would think none of us had jobs to do," I commented.

The five of us were sitting at Rowan's archery range. Rowan and I had been practicing, but then Oliver had wandered over, followed by Tyson and John. I'd stopped trying to concentrate when it was clear Rowan was being drawn further and further into their discussion. We'd made ourselves comfortable on the ground. I sat right next to Rowan, our arms pressed together as we leaned our backs against a tree.

John grinned at my comment. "It's not a bad life, having the master away, is it?"

"Now I know how the two of you can get away with all the training you do here," I said to Tyson and John.

"Don't exaggerate," Tyson said. "Sure, we have a bit more free time. You know what that's like now. But we still take our work seriously. It's why I wasn't able to break into Reeve's house with you all," he grumbled, still sore that he'd missed the adventure. "Believe me, the butler and housekeeper wouldn't let Bridgefield suffer, no matter how long the master stays away. We'll have plenty of time to enjoy the festival though." He grinned, clearly excited by the prospect.

"Do you think it will go on as usual?" I asked.

"I don't see why not," Rowan answered as he played with the ends of my hair.

"But what about the constables? Do you think they'll cause problems with the peddlers and performers? They'll be here an entire week. It's hard to believe Reeve's greed could be kept under control for so long with that many new victims about."

"You have a point," Rowan conceded. "On the other hand, I think the main reason Reeve has been so bold here is because we're isolated. He's the highest authority here. If he ends up causing problems for the peddlers, then that news will spread as they go from village to village."

"So then can't we use the festival rats to pass on the information?" I suggested.

He thought on that for a moment, twirling an arrow in one hand. "I suppose. It would only be considered rumor, but it's certainly better than nothing."

"We could encourage all those who attend to speak loudly and often about the magistrate's abuses to any of the peddlers who will listen," I said.

Tyson and John looked at one another. "Do you think it would work?" Tyson asked. "Sure, people gossip, but how far could it really get? And will it reach the right ears?"

"It's better than nothing," Rowan said, sitting forward.

"Unless the lawmen overhear people slandering them," I said when the idea popped into my head. "And end up punishing people for it."

We all looked at each other with worry. We had no idea how far Reeve was willing to take his abuse of power. Punishing someone for slander seemed well within the realm of possibility.

Rowan stood and brushed off his trousers. "That's a real concern."

"Hushed whispers, then?" I suggested. "We'll turn it into compelling gossip. Maybe that will make it more intriguing and cause it to travel faster."

"It's worth a shot," Rowan said as he nocked an arrow and then let it fly toward the target, which was fifteen paces away and at an angle. He still hit the bullseye.

"Show-off," John muttered and then smacked Tyson's shoe. "Time to get back to work," he said as he climbed to his feet.

"What?" Tyson groused. "Are you afraid the duke is going to show up to examine the gardens?"

"No." John's voice was matter-of-fact. "I'm afraid I'll get a tongue-lashing from the housekeeper." Tyson grumbled but followed John toward Bridgefield.

Oliver sighed. "I suppose that means I should get back to work."

"You love your work," I reminded him.

He gave me a look. "I love exercising the horses. No one loves mucking stalls."

I grinned. "Fair enough."

He gave a wave as he wandered off, and suddenly I found myself alone with Rowan. He stood just a couple paces away, fiddling with his arrow.

I came to my feet, keeping the tree at my back for support as a wave of shyness washed over me. "Emeline probably needs me back in the kitchen."

Rowan looked up at me and my stomach clenched. There was no denying the heat in his eyes as he stepped over to me. "You have to go now?"

I shrugged a shoulder. "I don't have to."

He came even closer with a smile and set a hand at my waist. "Are you nervous, Miri?"

I nodded. No use denying it.

"I don't want to make you nervous," he said as his thumb stroked my hip.

That one little gesture made my knees melt, but I managed to find my voice. "It's not a bad nervous."

A huge grin split his face and he had to look away for a moment before returning his gaze to me. "I'm glad to hear it."

I hoped he would take the hint and lean in to kiss me, but he didn't.

Before I'd thought it all the way through, I'd pushed away from the tree. My hands reached out, grabbing the front of his shirt and pulling him closer as I went up on my toes. I found his lips, and as soon as they made contact, a shock ran through me.

The feel of his mouth pressed to mine washed me in numbness and tingles, then his lips started to move against my own and suddenly I found my hands in his hair, holding him in place so I could kiss him more thoroughly.

His hands ran up and down my back, his fingers flexing against my ribs as he kissed me and kissed me and kissed me. It was too much and not enough.

All my nervousness had been worth it. Although our first kiss had been beautiful—perfect even—there was something wildly satisfying about this kiss. He didn't hold back as much as he had before and I was more confident that this was something real. There was so much rightness in that moment, in the way our bodies fit together, the way we breathed as one.

Eventually he pulled back, his breath labored as he pushed my hair off my forehead. "It seems your nerves serve you well," he said as he brushed his nose with mine.

I let out a little laugh. "I was thinking the same thing."

It was another harvest festival, and all the usual booths and tents were set up. Wares were sold, magic tricks performed, and the competitions drew great crowds.

Our newly formed band of outlaws had been here nearly half the day yesterday. In the past, the servants of Sutton had only been able to attend one day of festivities, but because the master and mistress of the house were gone, we had the opportunity to attend as many days as we wished.

So we had spent our time yesterday taking every opportunity to speak with anyone who would listen. We told them about the corrupt lawmen, and when we couldn't speak to people directly, we would stand in the middle of a crowd and lament over the situation—loudly enough that those in our immediate area could overhear.

We fully planned to do more of that this afternoon, but this morning we were due at the festival's archery course. We all had high hopes for Rowan's success in the competition.

We'd come in a wagon with may of the other servants but immediately ran off on our own. I had given Emeline and Hunter a wave, hoping I could avoid them for the most part since Hunter was unlikely to approve of spreading intentional rumors.

Rowan, John, and I hurried toward the archery competition, weaving our way through the crowds as they thickened the closer we got to the range. Archery seemed to be the most popular of the competitions, probably because it wasn't physically violent and so all the mothers felt fine bringing their young ones to watch.

When we reached the range, Rowan gave me a firm kiss on the mouth. "For luck," he said with a jump of his eyebrows, then he hurried away to line up with the other competitors.

I just smiled and joined John as we went to find a good spot from which to watch. There was a platform set up along one side of the range where the officials sat. Last year it had been Magistrate Phillips who sat on that platform alongside Princess Marilee and Sir James. Phillips had been the official judge, but he'd given the position of Lady Paramount to Marilee the year after she married Sir James. No one had to wonder why. It was what the people wanted, after all. Being declared a winner by a beautiful princess was so much more exciting than having a weathered old man do it. But today Phillips was gone, and though Reeve should have sat in his place, it was one of the constables who took the seat, acting as official judge while the Lady Paramount, whom I didn't recognize, sat beside him, ready to cheer the competitors and present the trophies when the time came.

I pulled my gaze from the platform and searched among the contestants for Rowan. I watched as about twenty-five archers lined up at one end, waiting their turn to prove their mettle and hopefully move on to the next round.

As the first group of five stepped up to the line, a little thrill shot through me. Something about their confident stance, the way they balanced their bows in one hand, left me fixated, just as it had last year. A horn sounded and I watched as each of the five competitors reached back, retrieved an arrow from their quiver, and shot it at the target in front of them.

Their success in hitting the targets ranged widely, but I could imagine what mistakes some of them

had made, and I guessed that if I had been down there, I would have been eliminated straight off.

When the next set of five stepped up, I paid attention to the way some fidgeted. Each man held a hand at his side, fingers twitching, reflexes at the ready, anticipating the moment when the horn would sound.

This group seemed even quicker than the first and I edged closer, anxious to see the rest.

John chuckled at my shoulder. "I didn't know you were so keen on sporting competitions."

"Just this one." I loved the skill that archery required. The balance, speed, form, and accuracy.

It had been watching this very competition last year that had convinced me that I wanted to learn. Before then, I'd been interested in sword fighting. I'd even convinced Emeline to start teaching me. But then I'd seen the archers exhibit their skills and I'd known—this was what I was meant to learn.

The third group of five stepped to their marks and my attention was once again arrested, this time by one archer in particular. Rowan's position was closest to those of us watching. His ice-blue eyes and blond hair made him stick out in a crowd.

I wondered if all the young women in the arena were watching Rowan, as captivated as I was by the way he held himself. While others around his age looked nervous standing up against seasoned archers, Rowan was at ease, utterly focused on the target in front of him. The hand at his side did not fidget or twitch, instead hanging loose and easy—relaxed even.

Then the horn sounded, and I could have sworn his arrow was nocked before any of the others even put a hand to the arrows in their quivers. Then the thunk of his arrow hitting his target sounded a full beat before any of the others. I was impressed. I, who had seen his skills up close regularly over the last months, was in awe of what he could do, especially when compared to those around him. I was lucky he'd agreed to teach me in the first place—for many reasons.

I followed him with my eyes as he moved out of the way, making room for the next group of archers. I loved that he wasn't swaggering. He didn't bask in the attention that his skill had garnered. He also didn't try to avoid the attention or look awkward about it. He accepted a handshake or two with ease and settled back to watch the next round. It was strange that I'd ever found him arrogant.

Perhaps it was the force of my stare. Perhaps it was just coincidence. Whatever the reason, his gaze suddenly swung our direction and settled on me.

I couldn't help the smile that lit my face. I was so proud of him. So I let myself stare into his pale blue eyes, my bottom lip caught in my teeth. I felt my pulse beat in my neck, three, four, five times, before one corner of his mouth curved up. Then he winked at me.

And I looked away. It was a heady feeling, flirting with a man from across the arena. Finally I understood all the flirtations I'd witnessed during these festivals. I'd seen it time and time again in my younger years. The revelry made people giddy and silly. They did ridiculous things that they would never have done in the course of their normal lives. The number of meaningless kisses and flirtations that I'd witnessed—and taken advantage of—as a pickpocket were too numerous to try to count.

Still, this wasn't a festival flirtation. I knew Rowan and amazingly enough, I felt as though he knew me too. Knew me and cared about me.

I returned my gaze to the competition. The contestants had been shuffled around, but I found Rowan easily, catching his eye several more times as he waited for others to take their turns. I watched each time he stepped up to compete, admiring his form and confidence, loudly cheering him on as he advanced, round after round. Each time he released an arrow, he would watch to see where it landed then cut his eyes over to me, giving me either a smile or a wink before lowering his bow and stepping back.

It made me smile every time.

There were only five competitors left when Rowan's nerves began to show. Several times as he was waiting for the horn to sound, he glanced up toward the platform. I followed his gaze, confused by what would have him distracted when he was on the verge of winning the entire competition.

For a fleeting moment, I wondered if he was distracted by the Lady Paramount, who sat primly in her spot, looking lovely and nervous.

Then I looked at the man beside her and my heart tripped. It was no longer the constable that sat in the judge's seat, but Magistrate Reeve himself. He was leaning to one side in his chair, his elbow propped on the armrest and two fingers resting against his mouth. His gaze was intent and decidedly fixed on Rowan.

Fear squeezed my heart. Reeve wouldn't recognize Rowan, would he? I had the sudden urge to warn Rowan off, to somehow communicate to him that he should do his best to lose and get out of there. But the horn sounded and Rowan was like a machine, drawing and firing on instinct.

The crowd roared and it took me a few moments to realize that two of the contestants had been knocked out. Rowan was one of the last three. They would fire again, knocking out the third-place contender, before the last two would shoot for the win.

Several men moved three of the targets back ten paces and then the official called the contestants to their designated line. Rowan looked over at me, and I gave him a desperate shake of my head, knowing he likely wouldn't understand my meaning, but I had to try.

He gave me a tiny nod just before the horn sounded. Three arrows thunked into the targets and my shoulders dropped in relief when I saw that while the other two had hit near the center of the bullseye, Rowan's landed on the edge of the center ring, almost touching the second.

He stepped back, giving the other two room to square up with their targets, which were again moved back before they shot for the title of champion.

I wanted so badly to leave, to pull Rowan from the arena and get as far away from Reeve and the festival as we could. Instead, the last round was shot, the winner was determined, and all three finalists were invited up onto the platform on which Magistrate Reeve sat.

Rowan climbed the few stairs with dignity, but the way his hand clenched and unclenched on his bow that hung from his shoulder hinted at his worry. If only he'd gotten out when there were five left, he could have departed without any fanfare.

I turned and started pushing my way through the crowd, desperate to get closer to Rowan. Deep in my gut, I knew that something was going to happen, something bad, and I needed to be there to help.

"Miriam, where are you going?" John asked from behind me.

I took only a moment to grab on to his cloak so that I could pull him with me. "Something is wrong."

"Something? What something?" he asked.

We broke out of the crowd and I started weaving my way around the people and stalls that surrounded the arena. "Rowan is up on that platform with the magistrate right now. The man whose house we broke into."

"They didn't see our faces. We were all in hoods."

I paused long enough to turn and face him. "Are you certain?"

"I—" He looked at me but his confidence wavered. "I'm almost certain."

I kept walking. I could hear the shouts of the magistrate as he presented the winners to the spectators, his voice rising just above the cacophony of the crowd's cheering. We reached the backside of the platform just as the three winners were each raising their arms above their heads, their trophies in hand as they soaked in the admiration of the crowd.

The Lady Paramount stood sideways, so I could see her smile in profile. She clapped enthusiastically along with all the rest, and then as the cheers died down, she got the contestants' attention and gestured for them to leave the platform.

I held my breath. All Rowan had to do was leave. Leave and come find me. Leave and come find me. Then we could go home where I knew we'd be safe.

Rowan started down the steps first, allowing the first-place winner his last moments of glory as the crowd continued to cheer. I started to believe Rowan would be allowed to leave without incident, but as soon as his feet touched the ground, a constable stepped forward, took his arms, and propelled him away from the arena.

"No," I sighed in dismay, my feet moving toward him.

Rowan was struggling to release himself, and I ran forward, desperate to help, only to be caught around the waist and yanked in the opposite direction. The world seemed to spin around me and I lost my bearings as I fought against the hands that dragged me one moment and picked me up the next. It wasn't until I'd hit the floor, landing on my hands and knees, that I was finally able to figure out what had happened.

Looking up, I realized I was inside one of the large tents that dotted the festival; a constable stood over me as Rowan was manhandled through the tent flap by another lawman.

Magistrate Reeve entered soon after, letting the tent flap close behind him before drawing his sword and placing the tip at Rowan's chest with a dangerous curve of his mouth.

I stopped breathing.

Rowan stilled immediately, though his breathing was labored and his eyes kept cutting over to me, where I remained on the floor.

"So," Reeve said with a slow curl of his mouth, "I seem to have caught a thief."

Rowan looked down at the sword that rested so casually above his heart then back at the magistrate. "I don't know what you're talking about, sir."

"Oh, but I think you do." He tilted his head to a chair that sat close by. "Sit."

Rowan allowed himself to be pushed into the chair without any fight, though I could see his mind running frantically. He sat and after a glance at me, he turned back to Reeve. "What's the girl doing here? I've never seen her before."

Reeve threw his head back and laughed. "Now that...that is entertaining." He sheathed his sword and dragged a chair over, placing it directly in front of Rowan before sitting in it and resting his forearms on his knees. "Do you want to know what gave you away?" He asked with a smile and a little jump of his eyebrows. "Hmm? Do you?"

"I don't know what you're—"

"It was your flirting," Reeve said in a loud whisper, a grin sliding into place.

Rowan just blinked.

Reeve sat back in his chair, looking so satisfied with himself. "You know, if the two of you hadn't been mooning over one another, I might not have realized. We had very little to go on," he said as if he were telling a good story in a tavern. "But the one detail that both of my men were clear on was that there was a girl there." He stood abruptly and walked over to me where I sat on the ground. Crouching down so he was at eye level, he picked up a handful of my hair.

I wanted to cringe away from his touch but I was stuck, my legs curled under me to my left and my right hand pressing into the rough weeds and grasses that the tent had been set down upon.

Reeve bounced my curls on his hand, almost like he was weighing them. "A girl with curly, bright-red hair." He shrugged and stood, turning away from me.

I cut my eyes over to Rowan, who was obviously seething, angry, and worried. He looked ready to burst from his chair and attack Reeve from behind, but the heavy hand of the constable sitting on his shoulder kept him in his seat.

Reeve continued. "It wasn't much to go on—a red-haired girl—especially since I wasn't nearly as interested in catching a little lookout as I was in catching the man who left this behind." He turned to face us again, holding an arrow in his hand. "I was looking for an archer. And I was looking for a lass with red hair." He held a hand out to each of us. "And look what I found." He set the arrow down and pulled a flask from inside his vest, taking a swig before looking back at us. "So. What are your names?"

Neither of us said a word.

Reeve's face turned ugly and he slammed his hand into the table that sat beside where he stood, the surface covered in carving tools and wood shavings. "Your names!" he demanded.

My mouth remained pinned shut. Somehow, giving my name would feel like an admission or like I was relinquishing my power. But I also recognized I might not be given a choice.

Just as Reeve was taking a step toward me, the constable spoke up from behind me. "I recognize her," he said. "Spoke with her at market one day. She told me she worked for Sutton."

"The Suttons, is it?" Reeve said, looking over at Rowan, at his defiant eyes and determined brow. Then he turned to me. "I see. The Suttons are gone. Their servants have a bit of freedom." His words were conversational but he suddenly reached down and grabbed my arms, hauling me to my feet and shoving me into a chair, where he loomed over me, his hands gripping the spindles just behind my shoulders, caging me in. "When the cats are away, the mice will play." His face was so close to mine that I held my breath. "I've always thought that saying was odd. After all..." He took hold of my chin, his fingers squeezing my cheeks. "There are plenty of predators willing to eat mice," he growled in my face. "Now. Name."

"Helen!" I lied, desperate to make him stop. And he did.

He immediately released my face and stepped back. "Ah, Helen. See, that wasn't so hard."

A commotion erupted outside. Voices shouting, a horse whinnying. Reeve and both his men looked toward the noise but didn't seem inclined to move.

Then something slammed into the tent. It seemed like a scuffle was occurring just outside the door. Reeve drew his sword again, gesturing from his men to the door. "Go take care of that," he shouted.

They were quick to obey, their shouts joining the others once they were outside. Reeve had his sword pointed at Rowan with one hand and pulled out his flask with the other, taking a swig.

He seemed unconcerned by my presence, for which I was grateful. If he underestimated me, then perhaps we had a chance. My eyes darted about, wondering if I could grab a chisel from the table before he noticed. Then the faint noise of canvas being sliced reached my ears, I kept very still, not wanting to draw Reeve's attention in any way. Someone was cutting a hole in the back side of the tent, just behind me.

It occurred to me that the scuffle out front was likely a distraction orchestrated by our friends. For the first time since being pulled into the tent, I remembered that John had been with me—right up until I'd run to help Rowan, John had been there. My heart swelled with hope as I became certain that it was him who had gathered help and was trying to free us.

I redirected my mind to what needed to be done next. It was imperative that I be a help and not a hindrance. I wiggled my fingers and my toes, doing my best to unlock my muscles so that I would be ready to move when the time came.

Reeve put his flask away, looking annoyed. "Cursed festival rats," he muttered under his breath

then shouted toward the front of the tent, "Such dramatics!"

John burst through the hole behind me at that moment, charging toward Reeve with his staff. I moved toward the slit in the back wall, ready to help get the boys out when the time came and watching as Reeve's sword rose to meet John's weapon. Behind their fight, I saw Rowan push his feet into the ground, forcing his chair to topple backward and then doing a back roll to his feet. I couldn't understand why until he reached for his bow and quiver, which leaned against a pile of furs behind him.

Rowan had an arrow nocked and aimed before my mind could even guess at what he was doing. Then he loosed the arrow and Reeve let out a cry of pain and fell to his knees, the arrow protruding from his thigh as he looked at it with horror contorting his face.

"Go," Rowan shouted and they both turned toward me. I pushed through the slit and moved aside, holding the canvas apart so they could more easily get through. John came through, then Rowan, who grabbed my hand and took off at a run.

As we dodged around wagons and slipped past tents, we were joined by Tyson, who I had to assume had helped with the distraction.

We ran flat out for several minutes before stopping to catch our breath. "Should we go farther into the forest?" I asked, my breath heaving as I rested my hands on my knees. "They know we work at Sutton, so we can't go back there."

"We could go to Bridgefield and hide there," John suggested.

"Hide from what? We haven't even done anything wrong yet!" Rowan argued in frustration. "Not that they know about at least."

"Nothing wrong?" I said in disbelief. "You shot the magistrate!"

He looked sheepish but shook his head. "I mean before they caught us."

"We broke into Reeve's house," Tyson countered.

"But we didn't take anything. Saints above, they didn't even see us in his house, they only saw us running away," he pointed out as he paced back and forth, his hands on his hips. "And just now?" He gestured back the way we'd come. "All we were doing was participating in the festival. We weren't doing anything wrong at all. If they catch us now, they'll throw us in prison, even though all we've done is feed people and return their stolen items."

"That's all we were ever going to do, Rowan," I argued, worried that he seemed so intent on actually committing a legitimate crime. "The plan wasn't to create mass chaos or murder anyone."

He shook his head. "Of course not, but if we're going to be thrown in prison anyway, we could at least do what we failed to do before."

I blinked as silence followed his words.

We looked at each other and I started to understand what he was suggesting.

"Right now," he said, his eyes intent on me. "While most people are at the festival and the constables are going to be looking for us in the forest or at Sutton."

Heaven help me, he was making sense. "We hit Reeve's house now," I breathed.

"Exactly," Rowan said.

"Brilliant," Tyson breathed out.

"Hey!" came a call from behind us.

All three men spun and raised their weapons, Rowan stepping in front of me, his bow loaded and drawn.

"Whoa!" Oliver said, raising his hands in a calming gesture. "It's just us."

Looking beyond him, I saw that Ansel and Gretchen were a few paces behind, both wide-eyed.

The men lowered their weapons.

"You all should have gone home," I said.

"No way," Gretchen said as she scrunched up one side of her face. "This is war. Reeve attacked first, and we have to fight back." She folded her arms. "I'm not going home."

I turned to Ansel, hoping to appeal to the protectiveness I knew he felt for Gretchen. He just shrugged. "I go where she goes."

I groaned, pulling on my hair.

"Come on, Miri," Oliver cajoled. "You know this is what we've been training for."

Yes. I suppose in some ways, I knew that this was exactly what they'd been preparing for all these years, but I wasn't like them. Sure, I'd taken to learning the bow and arrow, but I'd never planned to actually use it against someone. Running into a fight had never been part of my plan. But this group... they'd been training for years with the objective of keeping themselves and each other safe. And while I might not have had that goal in mind for myself, I couldn't deny that it was a noble thing my friends had done. I also couldn't pretend that I hadn't already been sucked into it.

I looked around at the group, and when I caught John's eye, he pointed his chin toward Ansel and his sister. "We need lookouts."

I sighed in resignation. "Yes, we do."

Rowan nodded. "Let's head back toward the village. We'll plan as we go."

I could not decide if we were brilliant or if we were the most idiotic, foolhardy band of outlaws ever to grace the earth. We were going back to a place where we had nearly been caught once before. It was daylight once again, and it was the house of the man who had the power to throw us in prison.

If Hunter knew what I was doing, he would strangle me.

We were doing our best not to stay together. We'd sent Ansel and Gretchen to go begging at the parson's door. They were to tell Father Tucker they were helping us and ask for the use of his wagon.

I watched from across the lane, pretending to eye the goods that were on display outside the tailor's shop. Father Tucker answered their knock and they conversed there in the doorway for several minutes. The parson seemed surprised but agreeable, and eventually Ansel crossed his wrists behind his back, signaling that Father Tucker had agreed to our plan.

I hid my relief, fingering a few ribbons before crossing the street and slipping into the space between the magistrate's home and the tavern. By the time I reached the back door, Rowan was already there, a scarf fitted over his face to hide his identity. He kept his back to the wall beside the door. We knew the door would be barred, so I would need to convince the maid to open it for me.

I rapped on the door, my knocks quick but quiet. Fortunately, I didn't have to worry about attracting the attention of the parson, who was on our side, or the tavern owner, since he had closed up, choosing instead to take his barrels of ale down to the festival.

Soon, I heard approaching footsteps from inside and decided to add my voice to the ruse. "Help!" I hollered, just loud enough to be heard through the door but not loud enough to attract the attention of those walking the street at the front of the house. "I need the magistrate's help, please!" I pleaded, making my voice sound tear-filled and vulnerable.

As soon as I heard the door being unbarred, I moved aside and out of sight. When the door creaked open, Rowan was already there, his bow nocked and drawn, the tip pointing at the girl's chest.

The maid gave a startled yelp, trying to shut the door, but Rowan's boot was wedged in the way.

"Remain silent and you will remain unharmed," he said calmly, advancing with confidence.

The girl whimpered and a wave of guilt washed over me. I hated that we had to use her this way.

Rowan disappeared inside, the door shutting behind him. As I waited for him to return, Tyson, Oliver, and John joined me.

"We must be crazy," Oliver muttered, gripping the hilt of his sword that hung at his belt.

"Yes, we are," Tyson said with relish.

"Focus," John chastised. "This isn't a game."

Tyson gave a shrug. "That doesn't mean I can't enjoy it."

John just shook his head and we all fell silent until the door opened and Rowan waved us inside.

"She's tied up in the kitchen," he said as he closed the door. "Let's get to work." He gestured to Tyson. "Cover your face and go stay with the maid so she doesn't make any noise."

He ran off to obey.

"Where are Gretchen and Ansel?" Rowan asked.

"Playing a game at the side of the house. They'll start yelling at each other if anyone starts looking at the house too closely."

"And the wagon?"

"Father Tucker is driving it over. He'll leave it out back and then return to the parsonage."

We all moved to the bedroom, where the two large trunks sat against one wall. "Miri," Rowan said, gesturing to the locks.

I knelt before the first trunk, working on the lock as Rowan stripped the blanket from the bed. As soon as I popped the lock, I moved to the next one, letting the boys step into my place so they could lift the lid and start loading the contents onto the blanket, which he'd laid out on the ground. We had planned to bring burlap bags with us when the time for this theft came, but since our timeline had been so unexpectedly moved up, we had to make do with what we had. Fortunately, much of the loot was already contained in individual leather pouches.

My heart raced as John jumped out the window and we started handing him load after load through the window so that we didn't have to haul everything down the tiny hallway to get to the back door.

My pulse thrummed in my neck. This was insane. We wouldn't possibly get away with it. This entire idea was absolutely mad.

We transferred each armful out the window and into the front half of the wagon.

"Do we have something to hide this?" I had to ask. "Or are we going to drive off with it in plain sight?"

"Father Tucker threw in a large piece of canvas. I guess he uses it when he makes deliveries to the parishioners that live farther out," John explained.

"And who's going to drive?" I asked Rowan. "It can't be you. They know your face."

"Tyson and Oliver will be up front. You can drive a cart, can't you, Oliver?"

"Yes," he said as he hefted another bag to the window, handing it out to John.

"We're going to get caught," I muttered.

"Don't lose your nerve now," Rowan said close to my ear. "We can do this if we just keep our heads."

I snorted, not bothering to tell him that it was the fear of literally losing my head that had my chest aching with worry. But I kept working, my arms and back straining with the effort.

And then it was done. Both trunks were emptied and the last few bags were stacked by the window.

Rowan pulled up his hood and put his scarf over his face then went out of the bedroom. I followed him to the doorway of the kitchen where the maid was tied to a chair, facing away from me.

Rowan gestured for Tyson to go back to the bedroom, then he stood where the maid could see him but where he would not seem an immediate physical threat.

"I've no doubt you will report our crimes to your master, so I want to make one thing clear. I only stole what was stolen from others. And I will continue to dog your master's heels until he stops grasping for money and power. I'm sorry that we must leave you tied up, but our objective is important and I can't risk you sounding the alarm early. I hope that by leaving you this way, it will assure your master that you were loyal to him. I'm also sorry we scared you." He bowed, holding his hands together in front of him as though begging forgiveness, then he crossed to the door, taking my hand when he passed by. "Time to go," he murmured.

We left through the back door. Oliver and Tyson were on the cart's bench, and Oliver was waving Gretchen and Ansel over.

"Get in, Ansel," Rowan said.

I grabbed his arm. "We weren't going to involve them," I reminded him. "Having them borrow the wagon is one thing. Being caught riding away on a pile of stolen money is entirely another." I turned to face Gretchen and Ansel. "You must return to the festival, do you hear? Tell no one what happened. Tell anyone who asks that you lost track of us and don't know where we are."

John stepped up, placing a hand on his sister's shoulder but looking at me. "And what if Reeve comes home, sees the missing loot and goes looking down the same road they'll be traveling?" he asked.

"It's more dangerous for them to be with us," I countered.

"I disagree. Gretchen, get in the wagon."

I huffed a sigh but knew that I didn't have any right to interfere with John and his sister. "Ansel, you at least should go back."

Ansel gave a simple shake of his head. "I go where Gretchen goes," he stated as he stepped onto the wheel and threw his leg over.

"No," I said in frustration. "Rowan?" I said, hoping he would support me.

"I'm sorry," he said as he tied off the last rope that held the canvas down. "I agree with you. But the longer we argue, the more likely we are to get caught. We have to go *now*."

"I'll stay with them. I'll go back to Sutton with them. There's not room enough in the cart for all of us anyway," I said, pointing to the very limited space in the back half of the wagon.

Rowan paused for just a moment then shook his head. "They know your face, Miri. You can't risk staying." He turned to the others. "Tyson, Oliver. She's right. You can both stay with Ansel and—"

A crash from inside the magistrate's house made us all freeze.

Then the maid we'd left tied up started screaming.

"Never mind. We're all going. *Now*." Rowan lifted me up and into the wagon, where I landed with an undignified thump.

"Get under the canvas," he said as he, John, Gretchen, Ansel, and I all squeezed into the back portion of the wagon, lying practically on top of each other.

Oliver snapped the reins and the wagon lurched forward.

The shouts of the maid continued behind us, but we made it out of sight without anyone seeming to notice that a wagon had just departed the house of the magistrate and that it bumped along into the forest with the distinct sound of coins jostling together.

It was cramped and uncomfortable, and I could hear the strained breathing of everyone around me. But none of us dared move. I was curled up on my side, Rowan at my back. He managed to wedge his arm beneath my head. Even amid danger and chaos, he was thoughtful.

Each bump felt as if it made my entire skeleton jostle, but I remained quiet until I heard Tyson's tentative voice. "I think...I think we made it."

Rowan pushed himself up behind me and I turned to look at him. We both nodded.

The five of us sat up cautiously, arranging ourselves into more comfortable seated positions, each of us keeping our eyes trained on the land around us. We fully expected Reeve or his constables to come chasing after us at any moment. But despite our vigilance, we never saw them. They never came. We traveled deeper and deeper into Murrwood Forest, taking trails that weren't trails at all, winding our way through the trees until even we weren't sure where we were. It was only then that

we stopped.

And we waited, listening, still not believing we'd gotten away.

Birds chirped. The breeze rustled through the leaves. Our breathing sounded in the air, shallow and tense.

It was Oliver who spoke first. "Did we really just get away with that?"

"I..." John looked around one more time. "I think we did."

A couple more seconds of silence passed before we all turned our eyes to the huge pile that was tied down with canvas. We moved it aside and stared at the glittering mound of coins, jewelry, and trinkets.

Laws, there was so much of it. How had he collected this amount in such a short time? What kind of suffering did this pile represent?

"You all won't mind if I just sleep on top of this pile of treasure, will you?" Tyson asked as he climbed over the back of the wagon seat and onto the pile, where he lay on his stomach and made a show of snuggling down.

Rowan chuckled. "Good luck sleeping. That looks like a mighty unforgiving bedroll if you ask me." "I've never seen so much wealth," Tyson said, digging his hands into a bag filled with coins.

"Enjoy it for tonight, because it's all being returned," John pointed out.

"Returned to who?" Oliver asked. "We don't know where it all came from. And how are we going to distribute it? Giving out piles of money is bound to attract attention."

Silence stretched for a moment as we realized that our plan had not extended this far. We'd been so focused on retrieving the stolen goods that we'd never considered exactly how we would deal with actually having it.

"What about Father Tucker?" I suggested.

"What about him?" John asked.

"He said he hears stories from the villagers. He'd know where to start. He might even be willing to return some of it himself."

Rowan looked thoughtful, then slowly nodded his head. "It's worth pursuing. But any other decisions on how to deal with it should probably wait for tomorrow. If we're stuck here for tonight, we'll need food. I'll go see what I can find," Rowan said, hooking his bow over his shoulder. "The lot of you need to get that wagon hidden." Rowan gave me a wink before heading into the trees.

John stood and took charge. "Come on. Let's get this covered. If anyone comes along, we all have to split up and leave the wagon behind. And I'm not about to let this collection be hauled back to Reeve's house because we failed to keep it safe."

We all worked together, picking out a spot beneath a tree with low-hanging branches, then gathering other branches, vines, and foliage until it was completely covered.

Once the wagon was well and truly hidden, we set up camp a fair distance from it. We had just started a fire when Rowan returned, two small animals hanging from his belt.

Oliver cheered when he saw them and happily took charge of their preparation. As Rowan looked around at his band of thieves, his shoulder dropped, like he was relaxing for the first time in a long time. Then he turned his back to the group and wandered away.

I looked around at Gretchen and the boys, but they all seemed to be happily engaged in the adventure of the moment. I doubted they'd even noticed Rowan's departure, much less the way his steps were heavy with fatigue.

I went after him, following at a distance until he sat himself beside a tree on the crest of a hill. I climbed up the rise, appreciating the way the sun had gone down, leaving hues of purple and pink

behind. I sat on the ground beside him, wondering if I should offer to leave him be when he didn't look over at me.

But then he reached out and took my hand in his, keeping his eyes ahead while giving my palm a gentle squeeze.

I turned my own eyes to the sky and took a steadying breath. Today had been chaos and danger and triumph. It was a lot to take in.

"I don't know," Rowan said, finally breaking the silence, "if the others realize what we've started."

His words sat heavy on my heart. "I was just thinking about that."

He turned to look at me. "And what do you think?"

The burden of our choices weighed on my shoulders. "I think our lives are forever changed," I said quietly. "I think there may be some very hard times ahead. But I trust you." I titled my head toward the others and smiled. "I even trust them. I believe we can do more good by continuing on our course."

He let out a breath. "That's good. Because I don't think we have a choice anymore."

"Does this make us outlaws?"

"Yes," he said without hesitation. "Though I don't think I've ever met an outlaw as beautiful as you are."

I gave a little shake of my head and smirked. "You're just trying to distract me from the fact that you shot a lawman," I teased.

He shrugged, not looking proud of what he'd done, but not looking ashamed either. "I didn't see any other option."

My smile faltered. "What do you think he would have done with us if we hadn't gotten away?"

He blew out a heavy breath. "I really don't like to think on it. I can't imagine he would have been fair or of a mind to follow the law. If he's capable of stealing from widows and starving children, he can't have many scruples at all."

I leaned my head on his shoulder. "So where does that leave us? When the sun rises tomorrow, where will we go? That wagonful of gold isn't just a pocket watch I snatched back. It's *everything*." My words shook. "We just stole *everything* from Reeve, and he's going to do anything in his power to make us pay for it."

The breath he released was unsteady.

"I'm sorry," I said, picking up my head so I could look at him. "I didn't mean to sound grim, but we have to face the reality of what we've started."

"I know," he assured me. "And I'm grateful you realize the severity of what we've done. It's just hard to sit in that reality sometimes."

"Yes. It is."

The dim light on his face revealed the moment his gaze dipped from my eyes to my mouth and got stuck there.

My nerves reared up and I bit my lower lip, wondering at the thick heat that suddenly blazed between us. Just when I was sure he was going to lean in, he turned his face away, looking out at the sky again.

"We should head back and speak with the others," he said.

I cleared my throat. "Yes. Of course."

He jumped to his feet and offered me a hand up, which I took. I expected him to drop my hand right away and walk back to camp. Instead, he lifted it to his lips, pressing a kiss to the back of it before lacing his fingers with mine and meandering back to the others.

We sat around the fire to eat the two small animals that Rowan had caught, a sense of calm finally settling over us as the rush of excitement wore off.

"We need to gather more wood for the fire," John pointed out as he brushed off his fingers and stood. "It's not going to get too cold, but it will be more comfortable if we can all stay close to a good fire."

"Plus it will keep animals away," Rowan said.

John nodded. "That too. Everyone go find fuel for the fire."

Once we'd each returned with a handful of sticks and branches, we got the fire started and spent the next several hours sitting around it, rehashing our escapades over and over. We were all in awe of our success, but we couldn't see what the next step would be.

Eventually, it was time to get situated for the night.

"Gretchen, you bed down over here," John said, pointing to a spot beside him.

"I was going to sleep over here by Ansel," she said stubbornly, and I watched as Ansel's face turned bright red.

"No," John said simply. "Get over here."

Gretchen harrumphed and stomped over to where John pointed. "I don't understand why I can't sleep where I want."

"Because you're a young lady and he's almost a man."

"He's like a brother. Don't be gross."

John raised his eyes to the heavens in exasperation. Ansel stared at the ground. I buried my face in my skirts, smothering my laughter.

"No wonder Mama is always exasperated with you," John muttered as he lay on his back, his arms crossed over his chest.

Looking over at Rowan, I saw him pinching his lips together, laughter in his eyes.

I leaned close so only he could hear. "It's going to surprise her one day when she realizes she's fallen for him."

"You think she will?" he asked.

I nodded my head. "There will probably be a beau or two for her, but they won't be able to live up to the devotion that Ansel has shown her."

"He's smitten," he observed.

"Yes, and he's only recently realized it. He has no idea what to do about it though."

"No one knows what to do with young love."

We kept our heads bent together, talking of our success, the next steps, our families, our lives. We realized some time later that we were the only ones still awake. Everyone else had fallen asleep while we were distracted by our conversation.

But now we did notice. And with all the others asleep around us, Rowan and I were very much alone in the forest. I leaned back on my hands and looked up through the leaves, finding the stars that filled the space between, trying to decide what I should do next.

What I *wanted* to do was snuggle into Rowan's arms and have him kiss me until my hands tingled. But I didn't know if that was what I *should* do.

"Do you regret it?" His quiet query sounded beside me.

I looked over at him. "Regret what?"

"Any of this? Stealing? Running? Being here with me?"

I reached over, running two fingers through the golden-blond hair just behind his ear. "No," I said. "I don't regret any of it."

He caught my hand in his. "Then why do you look so solemn?" he asked, bringing my hand to his mouth and brushing his lips back and forth over my fingertips.

My heart swelled all the way into my throat and it took me several attempts to speak. "I was trying to decide if I should kiss you."

That made him pause, and he pulled his lips from my hands, threading his fingers through mine instead. "And what have you decided?"

"I don't know if I have a choice."

"You always have a choice."

I shook my head. "My heart disagrees," I said as I moved toward him, pressing my lips to his.

The backs of his fingers brushed my cheek before his fingertips sank into my hair, sending a chill down my spine.

The feeling of safety I always had with Rowan fell over me. Odd, considering the obvious danger we'd all put ourselves in and the uncertainty of the future. But it was there in his arms—undeniable.

I woke the next morning with the comfortable weight of Rowan's arm on my stomach.

The sounds of shuffling and movement coming from the other parts of the camp made me pry my eyes open. The sky was only barely lightening, the sun not having broken above the horizon, but some of the others were already stirring. Someone had kept the fire going during the night and despite the chilly temperature, I was warm under the double weight of both my cloak and Rowan's. He and I had fallen asleep, curled up on the ground facing each other and talking into the early hours of the morning. I rested my hand on top of Rowan's, where it lay on my middle, then slowly eased out from under it. He groaned and rolled to his other side.

I sat up, rubbing my eyes with the back of my hand and looking around. Gretchen and Ansel were already awake, sitting a ways off and playing some sort of game with rocks on the ground.

Oliver and Tyson were still fast asleep, but John was tending to the horses.

I got up and headed into the trees to take care of my morning habituals and gathered some firewood on my way back. I also did my best to run my fingers through my hair and make myself a bit more presentable. Though why I bothered when I was among a group who most people would consider ruffians, I didn't know.

That was a lie. I did know. I did it for Rowan.

I forced my mind back to more practical matters, and by the time I returned with an armful of sticks, I knew it was time to stop daydreaming and get on with the business of dealing with our situation.

Rowan was awake and clearly looking for me when I walked back into camp. His face brightened when he saw me, his shoulders relaxing. My own mouth curved in response as my stomach swooped at the sight of his smile. But I pulled my gaze away and dropped the wood by the fire. "All right, men," I said and then tipped my head toward Gretchen. "And young lady."

She giggled. I was fairly certain she considered this to be a grand adventure, and I hoped that fanciful outlook wouldn't be crushed all too soon.

"We need to get word back to Sutton and Bridgefield. I'm guessing there are a fair number of worried people back home."

Rowan shrugged. "My parents know what I've been doing. I don't think they'll panic unless given a reason."

"And being gone overnight isn't a reason?" It would be for Hunter. There was no way he *wouldn't* notice my absence since I worked in the kitchen with his wife. They would have every reason to be anxious when they realized I was missing.

Rowan shrugged.

"And what about you?" I asked John, tilting my head in the direction of Gretchen. "How do you suppose your mother is doing?"

He shrugged as well. Was that the only gesture these boys were capable of? "My mother knows I'd never let anything happen to Gretchen."

I gave up trying to convince them and instead just said, "Trust me. We need to get word back to

them as soon as possible."

"I'll go back," Ansel volunteered. "My father will be anxious," he admitted, studying his own foot as he kicked his toe into the dirt.

"I'll go with him," Gretchen said. "I'll just tell everyone that we all stayed at the festival too long and decided to camp out there instead of walking home in the dark."

It wasn't a very good explanation, but it was better than nothing. "Tell them the rest of us stayed to help some of the villagers." It was vague, but it would have to do. "And be sure you let our families know we're all right, but try not to tell them any more," I advised.

Of course, I knew there was a good chance that people knew exactly what had happened. Laws, Rowan had shot the magistrate in the leg! Surely there would be plenty of people in an uproar about that. And the maid at Reeve's house had likely shouted until all of High Street heard the story of a band of outlaws who robbed her master in broad daylight.

"Either way, we'd best smother this fire and get a move on," Rowan said. "We'll have to leave the wagon hidden here."

"What of the horses?" John asked. "We can't leave them out here."

"Return them to Father Tucker?" I suggested, since that seemed the most logical thing.

Rowan shook his head. "I don't dare go back to Father Tucker. They'll be watching him for certain, and he's too close to Reeve."

"Ansel can take the horses and stash them at Sutton," I said, wanting to give the children not only distance from us but a faster way home. Plus, I knew that Ansel, being a stable master's son, had plenty of experience with horses.

Rowan and John both nodded at my suggestion.

Good. That was one worry solved. "And the hoard of stolen goods?" I looked around at everyone, waiting to see if someone would come up with a course of action. "Should we just keep it hidden? Wait to return any of it?"

"It's market day," Oliver said suddenly.

We all turned to him, confused by the announcement. "Are you suggesting we go spend some of this money?" Rowan asked.

He shook his head. "No, I'm saying a lot of it was stolen from the people selling at market. We could return some of it, right to those who were stolen from, without them even knowing."

"So it's like stealing in reverse?" Ansel suggested.

"Exactly. Instead of going home to find their pockets lighter, they'll find them heavier." Oliver gave a shrug but looked proud of the idea.

"I like it," Rowan said. "There are plenty of items that I recognized in the hoard. Gem talismans from Garnet. Watches from Mr. Dewey. Jewelry from Mr. Harper."

As the boys' voices raised in excitement, I felt I had to tamp down a bit of their excitement. "Do you really want to go back into the village?" I asked. "What if we walk right into Reeve's path?"

"I think we can avoid the lawmen easily enough. And since we won't be trying to take anything from them, it should be fairly quick."

"Just don't get overconfident," I advised. "We got away last night, and I'm honestly not sure how we managed it. Most of it was luck."

"That hurts, Miriam," Oliver said as he placed a dramatic hand to his chest. "It hurts right here, knowing you don't have any confidence in our skills."

I rolled my eyes. "I would hardly have been in that house with you yesterday if I didn't have confidence in your skills. I'm just pointing out that you still need to rely on those skills. Don't go

strutting into the market thinking you can get away with anything just because we got away with this." "All right, all right," Oliver said, waving me off. "Go ahead. Be the voice of reason."

"I happen to have a vested interest in the safety and freedom of everyone here," I pointed out. I didn't want them thinking of me as the mother hen, but laws, sometimes that's what they needed.

Oliver grinned at me. "I know it. I'm only teasing." Then he turned to the others. "We are going to do it, though, right?"

John set a heavy hand on Oliver's shoulder and squeezed. "Always anxious to get into more trouble."

Rowan came over and put an arm around my shoulder. "Thank you for being the voice of reason," he said so that only I could hear.

"They don't seem to like it," I pointed out as the others continued to plot our reverse theft with glee.

"They don't think they need to hear it, but they do."

I breathed in relief, grateful we were of the same mind.

We went through the contents of the wagon, each grabbing items that we knew were likely to belong to a specific seller, then we divided things up, making sure none of us were too heavily laden. At first we thought each of us should return all the items belonging to one person, but we soon realized it would be difficult to return five or six items unseen. It would be easier if we each took items belonging to several different vendors. That way each small item could be easily placed as we passed by and would be less likely to draw notice. We each also grabbed several fistfuls of coins, knowing that the food vendors had been stolen from just as much as those who had valuable pieces.

I just hoped it would work.

We all worked to hide the wagon even more thoroughly than the night before, then we set off toward the village. It was a fairly lengthy walk since our flight had taken us deep into Murrwood Forest, and we made marks in the trees along the way to be sure that we could find our way back to the wagon.

When we finally reached the road, we sent Ansel and Gretchen on their way with the horses. "Do not go through the village," I advised for what felt like the hundredth time.

They both rolled their eyes. "We know," they said in unison before taking off.

I breathed easier once they were on their way. Having them with us had been dangerous. The magistrate knew Rowan's face as well as mine and John's, which made what we were about to do seem bold. Too bold. Reckless even.

The five of us all entered the market, but none of us were together. The constables knew there were several of us. Our best defense was to go about as individuals and do it as quickly as possible.

I kept the hood up on my cloak, but I'd also torn a length of linen from my underskirt and bound my hair with it. My red hair had given me away once already. I wasn't about to risk it again.

We arrived when market hours were well underway, the stalls busy and the street crowded. I strode through the throng with purpose in my step, swinging by Miss Garnet's stall to drop off a trinket in the shape of a caterpillar. Then I went by the spice seller, looking over the bowls of pungent offerings while sliding three coins onto the table and tucking them behind one of the bowls.

Wick was next. I didn't try to be coy. I just went up and shook his hand with a smile, leaving several coins in his palm as I said, "I believe our esteemed magistrate would wish you to have this." I left him baffled as I faded into the crowd. When I reached the jeweler's stall, I stooped down to the ground and then stood with a bracelet dangling from my hand. "This seems to have fallen from your

table" was all I said as I handed it to the jeweler.

He made a noise of surprise but let me go without causing a fuss.

No. The fuss came from a different direction entirely. When I heard the shouts of Magistrate Reeve, my heart jumped, assuming that one of my friends had been caught or at least recognized. But the magistrate's anger wasn't directed at any of them.

As the people in the market backed away from the irate lawman, I had a clear view of him. He was throwing one hand in the air as he leaned heavily on a cane, his face red as he screamed.

"I don't care what piddly concerns you think you have! This is *my village*, and if you want to continue to be safe here, you will abide by *my laws*!" As he tried to pace in agitation, he limped horribly, the wound in his thigh clearly making movement difficult.

Good, I couldn't help thinking. I might have felt bad if he hadn't been harassing the woman who sold grains from the fields south of town. Though she stood stoically, refusing to yield, her three-year-old son was not so brave. He cowered behind her, burying his head in the back of her knees and clutching her skirts in his little fists.

I changed my mind. I wouldn't have felt bad for him regardless. He was a horrible person.

"Now get this cleaned up!" Reeve shouted as he overturned an entire basket filled with wheat, scattering it all over the ground before growling and stalking away.

Everyone was silent. Some watched Reeve depart, staring after him. Others crept closer to the woman, wanting to comfort and assist her. I couldn't help but notice that all those of lower class seemed appalled but not surprised. It was those few gentlemen and ladies who roamed the market who seemed utterly perplexed, as if they couldn't believe the scene they had just witnessed.

So while my heart cried out at the unfairness of Reeve's action, there was a portion of me that filled with just a little hope. Reeve hadn't been underhanded just now. He hadn't framed his demand in the form of a request or pretended as though he cared. He'd thrown a tantrum that showcased his greed and his hunger for power. Would those of higher class recognize the injustice and do something about it? Would they start to believe the stories their servants told? Had our rumors spread to the different classes? Would they take up the cause? Go against Reeve? Contact the high magistrate? *Something*?

Laws, I hoped so.

I wanted to go help the woman, but the urgency to get out of the village swelled in my chest. So instead I stepped around those who were already assisting her and dropped a handful of coins into a satchel that leaned against a stool behind her table.

We spent the afternoon in the forest, talking through our options and trying to make a plan. In the end it was decided that we would go to Bridgefield. The duke's abandoned estate had two separate wings that had been built at different times—the old wing and the new wing. The late Lord Damian Rockwell, who had died less than a year into his marriage to Princess Marilee, had occupied the new wing exclusively, and after a fire damaged the old wing further, it had been abandoned for good. That was our destination. We hoped that by inserting ourselves into the old wing, we would be able to stay hidden while keeping close to home.

It wasn't a perfect plan, but it was the only one we had. We couldn't live in the forest indefinitely despite what these young men might wish to believe.

We didn't travel on the road at all. We walked the forest paths, and I trusted that Rowan and John knew where they were going.

The sun was close to setting when we caught a glimpse of Bridgefield, but we didn't continue.

Instead we stopped, crouching down and listening for any sound that didn't belong, any indication that Reeve or his men might be waiting for us here. It was a very real worry and my nerves pulled tight with paranoia.

"So this is what it feels like to be an outlaw," Oliver commented dryly after several minutes of silence.

I looked at him sideways. "Did the running for our lives and driving away with a wagon full of gold and silver not make you feel like an outlaw?"

"I just meant I didn't realize it would be so boring." He was on the verge of whining.

I let out a long sigh and hung my head. I, for one, was not bored. I was terrified. Each time one of them would shift, I would turn to make sure it wasn't the sound of Reeve approaching. The sun set and was likely a beautiful sight, but I couldn't notice that right now. I was too busy feeling as if our luck had run out.

After a time, we all sat. None of us had said it, but I think we were all waiting for the safe cover that darkness would offer. Only then would we be willing to figure a way into the old wing and hopefully find rest there.

"Well," Rowan said, finally breaking the silence after darkness had settled over the grounds. "Shall we break into the duke's summer home?"

John snorted a laugh.

I gave a smile even though it was tough for me to find any amusement in the situation. The truth of what we'd done and what we would now have to face was settling under my skin, making me uncomfortable.

"I can get in through the kitchen," John said, "then I'll come open that door." He pointed to an archway near the front corner of the house.

We all ventured on silent feet across the yard and into the deeper shadows along the wall where even the moonlight didn't touch. John crept around back to the kitchen, and when the rest of us reached the side door, we waited with nothing but our heartbeats and our unsteady breaths to keep us company until the latch was lifted from within.

We stole inside and I tried not to choke on the stale air. John led us to a wide staircase and we ascended to the upper floor, our footsteps stirring the air with more dust. Despite the darkness, there was enough moonlight filtering through the windows for me to notice the blackened streaks that marred the walls of this hallway. "They really never repaired it," I whispered, unable to tamp down my curiosity. I knew they hadn't, and it still seems such a waste to let something so grand rot away.

"Only the outside," John confirmed. "They never used this wing anyway."

"Her Highness did," Tyson pointed out.

"Exactly," John said cryptically.

Even though I knew the stories, this evidence of the depth of bad blood that ran between Princess Marilee and the Duke of Winberg's family surprised me.

We entered a room halfway down the upper corridor. Phantom shapes of chairs and couches under dustcovers scattered the room and the taste of ghosts lurked in the corners.

"It's strange to be in this house," I commented, needing the comfort of my own voice.

Tyson shrugged. "Johnny and I are employed here, so we can't get in too much trouble, right?" He was trying to sound brave, but I could hear the unease. Everything was draped in unease—our voices, our steps.

I wasn't sure the housekeeper would agree with Tyson's assessment, and I was certain the duke and duchess would be swift to condemn our presence if they ever learned of it.

"Besides," Tyson continued, "if His Grace, the Duke of Winberg, isn't going to appoint trustworthy peacekeepers, he can at least lend us the use of his empty house." His voice grew stronger and louder with his indignation.

"That's not the way it works," Rowan said, kneeling in front of the fireplace, which still had a collection of old wood in a nearby basket. "The duke doesn't appoint magistrates directly. The magistrate picks his constables and when the time comes, the senior-most constable takes over as magistrate."

"And no one realized that was a crackpot idea?" Tyson demanded as he flung a dustcover off one of the couches, coughing when he breathed in the grime. The cover tangled around his arm and he shook it off as he cursed in frustration. "Give a man authority and it's easy enough for him to become greedy and corrupt. But sure," he said hotly as he waved a hand in front of his face. "Make it so we can't oust the bad ones."

"The ruling class doesn't care about corruption," Rowan stated without emotion as he pulled a flint and knife from his boot. "They care about control."

"Laws, I hope that's not true of everyone," I muttered. It was such a depressing thought. "It's certainly not true of Princess Marilee," I commented as I watched Rowan.

"In my experience, morality among the ruling class is just as varied as morality among the working class," John said as he stepped to a window, moving the drapes aside with his staff so he could peer out.

Rowan harrumphed. "You've had better experiences with the upper class than I have. Though," he said, cutting his eyes over to me, "I do agree about Her Highness." It took him a couple more strikes to get the fire to light.

I moved toward it as he coaxed the flame higher and stayed there when he stood to help the boys clear off couches. I should have helped but my legs didn't want to cooperate. An almost numb coldness was settling over me and I did my best to hide the shaking of my hands, hating that I couldn't control it. It made me feel weak.

I listened with half an ear as the boys made a plan to steal food from the kitchen. "It's food that Tyson and I would have eaten anyway," John rationalized.

Despite the heat radiating from the fireplace, the shaking in my hands wouldn't stop. The racing in my mind wouldn't ease, and the tumbled emotions of my heart would not quiet. It was like being inside the bell tower of the church with its clanging, reverberating chaos.

I jumped a little when Rowan's hands settled on my shoulders. I hadn't noticed him behind me. "Are you cold?" he asked.

"No, I—I think the past two days are catching up with me," I admitted, rather than trying to brush it off. "I was able to ignore the intensity of it all when we were busy. But now—" I wrapped my cloak more tightly around me as I turned to face him. "I'm terrified of what tomorrow brings. And before you ask, no, I don't regret it. But there will be consequences, and not knowing what those will be leaves a pit in my stomach." I reached out, framing his face with my hands. "I worry so much for you."

He blinked. "For me?"

"Yes. It's your face they know. You've been the most visible. You'll receive the most blame." I'd seen the way the magistrate had focused his wrath on Rowan when he had us in that tent.

He covered my hands with his own, pulling them gently from his face. "Perhaps. But I have a feeling that they won't be lenient toward any of us, which is why I'm terrified for you."

I stepped forward, wrapping my arms around his waist and resting my head on his chest. "Tell me it

will all be worth it."

"I think it already has been."

Despite the reassurance of his words, my trembling continued.

"What's wrong, Miri?" he asked, his voice thick with worry.

"I don't like this place," I confessed into the darkness.

His hands ran up and down my back, offering comfort. "A bit too gloomy for you?"

"It's not just that. It's the stories I've heard. Princess Marilee's first husband, Lord Damian Rockwell, was a brute and a tyrant. He turned this place into a prison for her."

"But he's dead now."

"I know that." I burrowed deeper into his arms. "I just don't like it here," I said, desperate to make him understand—to understand myself. "The stories and the dust and, yes, even the gloom, make it hard to breathe."

He pressed a kiss into my hair. "Let's go for a walk."

I nodded. He led me to the door, through the corridor and down the stairs with an arm wrapped around my waist.

We stepped out into the night and somehow the darkness blanketed by stars felt safer than the dense loneliness of Bridgefield's old wing.

It was odd that my trembling stopped after we stepped outside. Logic said that the cool air and breeze should have made things worse. Instead my breathing evened out and the reassuring warmth of Rowan's hand in mine eased the tension in my spine, allowing me to relax. I could feel Rowan's gaze on me as I regained my composure. I'd been paranoid out here just a little while ago, but there was something inside the old wing that felt more threatening than the black stillness of the open air.

His thumb caressed the back of my hand, trying to soothe. "I didn't realize what I was asking of you when I begged for your help," Rowan said suddenly as we meandered through the garden. "It was selfish of me."

Puzzlement no doubt twisted my features. "I'm not sure how. You were asking me to help other people, not you."

He turned to face me, taking both my hands in his. "I was asking you to join my cause without fully considering how it would affect you. I've been kicking myself over and over ever since Reeve grabbed us at the festival."

"I made my own decision," I reminded him.

"With a fair amount of pushing from me." He lifted one hand to kiss my fingers. "I'm sorry for that." "It's not as though I followed you blindly. I'm old enough to know my own mind."

"You're only seventeen."

I closed my eyes in frustration. "Please don't act as though you are older and wiser than me. I get plenty of that from my brother. And might I remind you that I argued with you plenty before I made my decision."

"I am older."

It was to his credit that he didn't say wiser. It also made me smile.

"I'm serious," he argued.

"I know. You are an old man. I can see the gray hairs shimmering in the moonlight."

He pushed a hand into my hair, his thumb running along my jaw. "Miri..."

"What?"

"It was you who said just a moment ago that the intensity of the last few days was catching up with you. It's taken its toll on you."

"On all of us," I corrected.

"Yes," he said, his eyes caressing my face. "It's also taught me a great deal about you."

I swallowed. "Like what?" I asked as the sound of rushing waves filled my ears along with the hammering of my own heart.

"I love you," he said, though I had to read the words on his lips since the declaration was so quiet and reverent.

He leaned down, his breathing shallow as his lips moved to brush against mine.

A shout shattered the moment and my eyes flew open. Harsh hands seized my arms, pulling at me. Rowan and I reflexively clung to one another, but Reeve and another constable held on to Rowan's shoulders and arms, dragging him inexorably away from me. I could see my terror and turmoil reflected in Rowan's eyes as the grip we had on one another stretched and finally broke. Rowan was immediately forced to the ground, the two men pinning him firmly on his back as he fought and struggled.

The constable who held me merely dragged me a few paces from the altercation, enough to be out of the way but close enough to see exactly what was happening and not help as I fought to twist out of his grasp. Both Rowan and I had our bows and arrows slung over our shoulders, but they were useless because we hadn't been paying attention. How had I let myself believe that being outside and vulnerable was preferable to something as benign as *bad feelings*?? Rowan's weapon lay trapped beneath his back as the magistrate loomed over him. Reeve's cane lay abandoned at his side and he was clearly favoring one leg, but his efforts combined with the constable's had Rowan at a clear disadvantage.

"That's right, you worthless little rat, try to get away this time," Reeve taunted, each word dripping with hate. He was kneeling on Rowan's right arm with his good leg while his hand wrapped around Rowan's throat.

"I knew when we didn't find them at Sutton Manor that they'd be here," the constable who held me said as he stuck his nose into the hair behind my ear. "Rats always return to their nests."

I jerked my head away and tried to elbow him, but his grip was iron.

"What do you think, men?" Reeve asked his constables, though his blazing eyes remained on Rowan. "Now that we've caught ourselves a thieving outlaw, what should we do with him?" His fingers convulsed and Rowan struggled for air until Reeve's fingers relaxed again.

"Tomorrow seems like a good day for a hanging," the one who knelt at Rowan's other side sneered, pinning his arm to the ground.

"No," I breathed, but no one heard me.

"I don't know," Reeve said, sounding thoughtful and yet rigid. "As much as I'd like the entire village to see this boy hang, I hardly want to give him the chance to escape." He removed his hand from Rowan's throat only long enough to pull a blade from his boot and rest the tip under Rowan's chin.

The way Rowan's jaw lifted, his neck stretched taut, made it clear that the knife was a very real threat.

I strained against the hands that held me, chest full of fire, hope leaking out of me.

Reeve leaned in closer to Rowan, his teeth bared. "Perhaps we should deliver justice right now." "No!" The scream was torn from my mouth.

His head snapped in my direction. "What's the matter, little maiden? Are the consequences of thievery too much for you to stomach?" He sneered at me, running the flat side of his blade against Rowan's throat. "Perhaps you should have thought that over before you defied the law!" His face was

almost purple and spit flew from his mouth.

He turned his fury back to Rowan, his grip tightening on the knife hilt.

I strained and screamed, desperate to do something—anything—to save Rowan's life.

Then a shout louder than mine rang through the air just before John's staff swung with so much force that it knocked both Reeve and the constable off of Rowan.

The constable holding me tried to push me aside to join the fray, but I grabbed on to him and soon found that I had help. Tyson tackled the man at the knees and together we brought him to the ground.

I looked to Rowan and saw that both he and Reeve had climbed to their knees, but Rowan was quicker to his feet as Reeve struggled to stand on his injured leg. Rowan pulled his bow from his shoulder and swung it at Reeve's leg, hitting the injury and making him crumple to his hands and knees again.

By the time Reeve looked up, both Rowan and I had an arrow trained on him. "Stay down!" Rowan warned, his arrow pointed between the man's eyes.

John was standing over one constable with a foot on the man's stomach and his staff poised against his throat. Looking behind me, I saw that the other constable was in a similar predicament, with Oliver and Tyson each standing on a wrist as they pointed their swords at him. Each of the lawmen's swords lay useless on the ground.

I was stunned. Had we really managed to turn the tables in such a dramatic fashion? I stared at the situation, breath panting, but it remained the same. We had come out conquerors. After going over the events in my head, I realized that Reeve's demented shouting must have covered the sound of John's approach. And John's sheer size and skill with a staff had made the surprise attack effective indeed.

I couldn't believe our luck.

"You'll hang, all of you!" Reeve shouted.

"Where do you go from here, boys?" the constable under Oliver's and Tyson's boots asked. "You're volunteering for an execution if you keep on this way. And you'll never get away with it." "We need rope," John said, ignoring our captives.

Saints and angels, we had captives.

Muffled shouts and the occasional thump continued to echo from the other side of the door. The five of us stood in the upstairs corridor, staring at the large slab of wood, silent and lost. We'd tied the magistrate and his two constables hand and foot before lashing them each to heavy pieces of furniture.

"What are we going to do?" I asked, my wide eyes still fixed on the decorative carvings in the wood. "Rowan, what are we going to do? This is bad. This is very bad!" I turned to him, hoping he would have answers at the ready. "We can't just keep them in there forever. They aren't our hostages."

"No. They're criminals," he said, staring at the door.

Why was he just staring at the door? "I don't think that's how most people will see it! We look like the criminals." We needed to think. We needed to plan. Maybe then this humming of nervous energy inside me would have somewhere to go.

"They attacked us!" Rowan shouted.

"Yes, and who's going to believe they weren't justified?" I threw a hand in the direction of the village. "There is no higher law in the area that we can go to to report their crime. And even if there were, they wouldn't believe us!"

"I know! I know. I just have to think." He turned away from me.

"What happens when they start making so much noise that they can be heard?" I asked as my frantic questions became too many. "What happens when the butler or the housekeeper come to investigate? We are trespassing and we have the magistrate locked up in a sitting room!"

"Maybe we should leave," Tyson suggested, his eyes shifting from side to side as he rubbed the palms of his hands on his trousers.

"And go where?" I demanded. "Back to the woods? Are we going to live out our days in Murrwood Forest in the hopes that no one finds us?"

"There has to be a solution," Rowan said as he paced back and forth.

"What?" I demanded, feeling my tenuous grasp on my emotions slipping. "What is the solution?"

"I DON'T KNOW!" Rowan roared.

I fell silent, noticing for the first time the complete lack of confidence in his face and his stance. Instead there was uncertainty, fear, and panic. My anger dimmed. He was flailing just as much as I was, and I was making things worse by yelling at him for a situation he had no more control over than I did.

"Just," Rowan finally said as his eyes darted from one spot on the floor to another, "just go. All of you. Go. I'll take care of this. This was my idea. It's my—"

"No," the four of us answered nearly in unison.

"YES," he affirmed. "There is no reason for all of us to hang." He turned to John. "John, we have to keep her safe. If you consider me a friend at all, you will take her far away from—"

"I'm not leaving," I insisted.

Rowan turned to me. "You were just yelling about our impossible situation. Now I'm asking you to

take yourself out of it." He looked to John. "Please, John."

John's face fell. They looked at each other in silence for several heartbeats before John closed his eyes in defeat and turned to me.

I pulled an arrow, nocked it, and aimed it at John's chest. "Don't even try," I warned, my hand steady and my mouth tight. "I'm getting pretty tired of you all thinking I'm some precious little gem you have to put in your pocket to protect."

John stepped back, hands raised, and I lowered my bow. Then I fixed my gaze on Rowan. "Might I remind you all that of the five of us, I'm the only one who grew up without a roof over my head. I'm the only one who was a thief before this all started. So stop trying to protect me. Just because I'm worried about what happens next doesn't mean I can't handle whatever it is."

Tyson rolled his eyes. "We know you can, but if you get so worked up over—"

"I'M ALLOWED TO HAVE FEELINGS!" I stared at all of them in turn. Each of them failed to hold my gaze except for Rowan, who just looked at me like he was devastated and proud all in one. "Now, I'm sorry I was yelling, but I'm perfectly willing to have a conversation about what to do next, so let's figure this out *together*."

Eventually they all nodded, and I managed to sweep all my misgivings into a pile that I would deal with later. Everything inside me begged me to run away and never look back, but I wouldn't do it without Rowan. If he stayed, then I would too. I just had to face the very real possibility that by staying, we were going to lose the future together that we hadn't even managed to speak about yet—a potential future that sat in the air between us, in the memory of the *I love you* and the kiss that never happened.

When I looked to Rowan, it was clear that he held the same lament. Regret and doubts hung on his features. Then he crossed to me, pulling me into his embrace, holding me with a desperate fierceness. "I just can't lose you," he said into the crook of my neck. "I lost her. I can't lose you too."

I hugged him back, trying to reassure him, but my own strength was waning, seeping into the floorboards as uncertainty dragged us all down.

A ruckus erupted below us. First it was the murmur of many voices and many footsteps outside. We all froze, wondering who it was and waiting for the noise to pass. Instead, the large front door clanked and groaned and opened. Voices chimed back and forth. The telltale glow of lanterns flickered off the walls.

Our sanctuary had been breached.

"Go" was all I had to say. Each of us turned and raced toward the servants' stairs at the opposite end of the corridor. The one lantern that Oliver held swung wildly in his hand but lit the way well enough that we found the stairs—only to descend all of five steps before realizing it was entirely blocked.

"No, no, no," Rowan muttered.

"It must have collapsed from the fire," John said.

"Can we go up?" I asked.

"Yes, there's an upper gallery. It connects to the other wing."

We all turned again, trying not to trip over each other as we climbed back up, but the moment we came back into the corridor, a voice shouted, "Stop!"

We faced our opponents. Two swords, two bows, and one staff were held at the ready, pointing in the direction of the nameless, faceless group of people approaching from the other end. We were in so much trouble, but self-preservation makes even the most foolish of people think they can be brave.

All we could do was wait, huddled together as footsteps echoed off the walls, and figures took

shape in the lamplight. A large man led the way, his gait sure and steady. Terror clogged my throat, but Rowan managed to find his voice.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

I heard the distinct hiss against leather as several blades were unsheathed, but the man in front held up a hand to his side, staying the aggressive advance of his men as he continued toward us without rushing and without alarm. He stopped only when the lamplight from the group met with the glow emanating from our own lantern.

With the large, imposing man standing there in all his finery and looking not the least bit intimidated, my heart gave one vicious thump, and I had the sinking feeling that I knew *exactly* who he was

A moment ago, I'd been lamenting our situation, thinking it couldn't get any worse.

"I am the Duke of Winberg."

It was worse.

"This is my home, and it's clear you do not belong in it." There was intensity in his voice, roiling just beneath the surface, making it clear that though his words were calm and measured, our situation was precarious at best. "Lower your weapons."

Every weapon being held by our little band of outlaws was dropped to the ground with a resounding clatter.

I sank into a curtsey, my eyes fixed to the floor, determined to remain there until I was given permission to stand straight—no matter how long that might take. The boys all bowed, and each of us murmured a polite "Your Grace" even as our voices trembled.

I heard one of the boys swallow. *Trouble* did not begin to describe our situation.

"You are trespassing in my home," the duke stated.

"Yes, Your Grace," I muttered and heard similar sentiments of agreement from the boys.

"Stand up so I can look at you."

We all rose, but I for one kept my gaze at the duke's feet. I was too afraid of what I might find if I were to look into his eyes.

"Light the lamps and take their weapons," he said. There was a shuffling while a couple of men who I assumed were guards carried out the orders.

I managed not to flinch when my quiver was taken from my shoulder and my bow removed from my sight.

"Are any of you employed by me?" the duke asked once the corridor was well lit and all of our weapons had been confiscated.

John and Tyson stepped forward.

"Your positions?"

"Groundskeeper, Your Grace," John answered.

"Gardener," Tyson said, though his voice barely carried.

The duke was quiet for a moment, and I was too curious to keep my gaze down. I looked at his face, wondering what could possibly be going through his head right now.

For the ruler of a nation and a man who had just caught five ruffians hiding out in his home, he seemed strangely calm. His expression was more curious than anything. That fact left me hopeful, though I fully expected that hope to be dashed at any moment.

The Duke of Winberg let the silence stretch as he studied each of us. The eerie quiet pulsed through me, making me sweat as I fought the urge to fidget.

"Rumors have reached my ears at the capitol. Rumors of poaching and thievery." His gaze moved

from one of us to the other as he made his speech. "I was determined to leave the handling of it to the magistrate. But as more rumors poured in, I realized it was odd that the Murrwood magistrate had not reported these incidents himself." Suddenly his eyes were fixed on my face. "You," he said. "You are not employed here?"

I swallowed. "No, Your Grace."

"Tell me what you know. I am curious to see how it lines up with the other reports I've heard."

My face went numb as terror and guilt pounded through me. I was sweating and shivering but I found the fortitude to do as instructed.

My voice shook horribly. "The magistrate, Your Grace. He is new. He has been in charge less than a year." I swallowed again. Might as well get to the point. "He is corrupt, Your Grace. He is cruel." "Corrupt how?"

I gripped my left hand with my right, squeezing my fingers 'til they hurt. "He and his men, they steal from the vendors at market. They put new taxes in place. Taxes so high and so grievous that many families could not pay and still feed themselves."

The duke's jaw tightened and his eye twitched, but he remained silent.

I took a deep breath, preparing to explain more, but then a thump sounded from the sitting room. My heart pounded harder and I sucked in a breath.

Worse, worse, worse.

The duke's eyes cut in the direction of the sitting room door then back at us. "Would anyone care to explain that?"

"I—" My throat closed off. I couldn't get any more out and my entire frame had started to shake.

The duke took mercy on me and turned to Rowan. "You. Explain."

Rowan's jaw shook as well but he seemed to wrap himself in both dignity and humility when he explained. "Your Grace. In that sitting room, you will find the magistrate and two of his constables bound and tied to chairs."

Shock ran across the duke's face.

"We poached to feed the families who could not feed themselves. We stole back the items that the magistrate and his men had stolen from others so that we could return them to their rightful owners. We—"He wavered, taking in a shaky breath through his nose, then continued. "We broke into the house of the magistrate and stole the hoard of coins and goods that he and his men had demanded from the villagers as taxes and payment for protection." Rowan paused, his chest heaving as he took shallow breaths, terror written in his eyes.

The duke's eyes narrowed. Rowan had said it, admitted it all. There was no going back now. Our fate was sealed.

Rowan continued. "When the magistrate and his men found us here, they attacked, we defended ourselves, got the upper hand and managed to lock them in there. We were trying to decide how to proceed when you arrived, Your Grace." His lips pinched and his eyes were wide with fear.

An overwhelming silence settled over the group. I could hear myself blink. There it was, all the truth, laid bare before us. A group of servants had become thieves, poachers, and trespassers, and we were now facing not just the law but the sovereign duke—the ruler of our nation. My knees trembled so badly that I could barely stay upright.

"Well," the duke finally said. "My shock is profound." He nodded at the admission and his expression tightened. "I am furious. There will be punishment. But firstly, I am perplexed. Why was word not sent to me?" A hard edge cut through his words.

The promise of punishment left me mute, but somehow John was able to lift a shoulder in a shrug

and answer. "We can't write, Your Grace. And the magistrate and constables were careful to target only the lowest of us." John looked defeated, like he'd given up entirely.

"And what about you?" the duke asked me. "Are you a servant elsewhere?"

I nodded.

"Your master and mistress? Do they know of these circumstances?"

I opened my mouth, trying to answer, but no sound escaped my lips.

The duke gave an impatient wave of his hand. "You need not fear to answer me. Please. I wish to know."

His words baffled me. He had just declared his own fury and promised punishment, yet he looked at me now with a measure of compassion and understanding.

"Surely your master can write," he prompted. "Did he know of these circumstances?"

I shook my head and swallowed. "No, Your Grace," I managed to say, though my words were stilted. "I am employed by Sir James Sutton and his wife, Princess Marilee. They are away in Dalthia, spending the autumn with her family. You see, it wasn't until they were gone that Magistrate Reeve started to put extra taxes in place."

His eyes narrowed. "And you believe that timing was deliberate?"

I breathed deep through my nose then forced my lips to form the words. "I think the entire village knows that Her Highness has an oddly close relationship with her staff and that such mistreatment would have been confronted by her and her husband directly."

A scoff sounded. My gaze was drawn to the regal woman that stood just behind the duke's shoulder. The Duchess of Winberg's lip was curled in disgust. "Pitiful that that woman should garner *our* subjects' loyalty." She turned her head to look behind her. "Edmund!"

The man who must be Edmund stepped forward. "Mother?" he asked, curiosity infusing his words. "At the end of our visit, you will remain here," Her Grace proclaimed.

Lord Edmund Rockwell rocked back and blinked in surprise, as did the tall beauty whose side he had left. His wife, perhaps?

"I beg your pardon?" Lord Rockwell said.

"You will remain here at Bridgefield," Her Grace said again, her tone crisp and broaching no argument. "It's time the people around here remember the goodness of their rulers instead of fawning over the foreign princess who betrayed your brother." Her bitter words were in deep contrast to her husband's calm demeanor. "You will remain here, take charge of this household, and show the people of Murrwood that the Rockwells rule with dignity and with the good of the people in mind."

Edmund continued to stand a little behind his mother, so she did not see his reaction, but I did. It was angry, surprised, and annoyed. But after a few moments, he settled his face into a neutral expression and simply nodded. "Of course, Mother."

The beauty who must be his wife said nothing but continued to stand there, wide-eyed.

The duchess squared her shoulders and sniffed. "This village is a disgrace. A pitiful—"

"That's enough, my dear," the duke interrupted her ranting.

"But—"

"I said that's enough!" It was the first truly impatient thing he'd said, and it was directed at his duchess. "These boys—these men—and this young lady did what we did not. They saw what we did not. They fixed what we did not."

My heart flew into my throat. Was he...agreeing with us?

His jaw was set as he continued with conviction. "They would not have had to go to such extremes if I had been a better ruler."

The duchess stepped forward and wrapped her hands around the duke's arm, suddenly all soft and solicitous. "You are a fine ruler," she insisted.

He shook his head. "No," he said as his shoulders sank just a little. "No, I'm not. I haven't been for a long time. Not since Damian died. I let that loss change me." He took a harsh breath, shaking his head. "And it's inexcusable."

"You'll make it right," the duchess crooned. "Edmund will help us make it right."

The duke nodded. "Yes, he will."

I felt like a spy or an eavesdropper, like I was listening in on a conversation not meant for me. It was strange indeed to watch the interaction of the duke's family. Did they not realize that they were having this very private conversation in front of us?

Not only that, but it felt like we were getting off topic. We'd just confessed to several crimes, which included having the highest authority of the village locked up in the sitting room. I would expect the duke and duchess to deal with us swiftly and with prejudice, but they seemed too distracted by their own bitterness and familial conflict.

So strange.

"And what is to be done with them?" It was one of the guards who finally asked the question that brought the situation back to the topic at hand. The duke's attention returned to us and I tensed, terrified but desperate to know so that I could stop wondering what the punishment would be.

The duke's gaze was thoughtful while his duchess's eyes were cold.

No one said a word, and we just waited and waited. Until...

"Nothing," the duke said.

My heart stopped. Surely I hadn't heard that right.

"Nothing?" the duchess asked, confused.

"Nothing?" the guard repeated.

The duke nodded, and I could barely breathe for the shock of it.

"They're thieves!" the duchess reminded him.

The duke looked at our little group, his penetrating gaze landing on each one of us, then said to my profound shock, "They should be commended."

Commended??

No one spoke, but my respect for the Duke of Winberg ballooned and overflowed in that moment. Here was a man who had not let his power turn to greed or cruelty. Here was a man in power I might be able to respect.

"What kind of leader would I be if I punished those who saw injustice and not only recognized it but did something about it?" he asked, his voice strong so that all could hear. "I cannot be everywhere. I have to hope and trust that those who have risen to positions of authority will honor their power and do right by me." He turned to his wife. "You saw the letter from Father Tucker. Everything they have said agrees with his report." He turned back to us. "Magistrate Reeve abused his power, and as I said, there will be punishment for that. The system broke down. You didn't have to take his responsibility. This wasn't your fight. Yet you did what the men appointed to those positions would not do. You put the welfare of my people first. Despite the danger it posed to you, you did what needed to be done."

My eyes flooded and my breath heaved in relief.

"Perhaps some will think it unjust, but I am pardoning every one of you. Because it would be the height of injustice to punish those who delivered so many of my subjects from great harm."

The duke made his proclamation of pardon and then turned his back on us and walked away. Perhaps that was the way of things when you ruled a nation, but it felt incongruous. He'd made a grand speech, praising us for what we'd done, pardoning our every crime. And then he'd simply turned his back, given orders to his guards for how to deal with the magistrate and his men, and then he'd left.

He and his wife and his son and his guards—the entire entourage. They all just walked away. The only person who paused to look back at us was a young woman—a lady's maid, if I had to guess. Her golden hair tucked neatly under her cap winked in the candlelight as she stared at us, her head tilted, her eyes curious.

"Melody?" a voice called out.

She turned in the direction of the woman who had called her and quickly followed after the duke's entourage.

The five of us didn't move. We seemed to be collectively holding our breath, waiting for the duke to declare his pardon as a grand joke and order his guards to put us in irons.

Instead, we watched as the duke's guards pulled the blustering and furious magistrate from the sitting room, half carrying him since his leg seemed unwilling to support him. The constables were escorted away in a more sedate fashion. Magistrate Reeve shouted insults and accusations at us all the way down the corridor, quieting only after a guard threatened him with violence.

The group disappeared down the stairs, leaving our weapons sitting in a pile on the ground.

The front door opened and a draft rose up, causing the lights of the wall lamps to shudder and blink. The murmur of voices seemed to crescendo before the door closed and all fell quiet. The lamp flames steadied and my heart beat a regular rhythm once more.

The shocked silence was deafening.

"How in the name of Saint Mortimer did we manage that?" Tyson exclaimed.

My knees trembled and I stumbled back, reaching for the wall to support me. Instead Rowan caught me and gathered me into his arms, practically picking me up off the ground as his terrified breaths whooshed out of him on each exhale. I just closed my eyes and clung to his shoulders with what little strength I had.

We weren't in chains. We weren't headed to prison. We weren't headed for a noose. We were just...free.

I opened my eyes to look at the others. Tyson stood there with a grin and wide eyes, like he couldn't believe his good luck. Oliver had turned his back to the group, trying to hide the fact that he was crying tears of relief. John's hands rested on his hips and he shifted his weight back and forth, taking slow, deliberate breaths. "I thought," he gulped out, "I thought we were done for. I thought..."

Rowan pulled back, leaving one arm around me as he wiped at his own eyes. "That's what we all thought."

"I didn't expect him to be that fair." My voice quavered. "Or listen that well. Or...care."

"I think we owe Father Tucker a debt of gratitude," Rowan pointed out.

Each of us nodded and Tyson said, "Hear, hear."

We all wandered over to where our weapons had been left, our steps stilted by the tension none of us seemed able to shake off.

John pointed his staff at Rowan. "I was ready to tackle you when you started admitting to all we'd done," he said then turned thoughtful. "But in the end, I think that's the reason he was so lenient."

Rowan nodded. "I think you're right."

I wrapped my arms around Rowan's waist. "The duke said himself that our story lined up with what he'd heard. If we'd tried to deny it...if we'd tried to claim that we'd done no wrong, I think he would have tossed us in jail." Our approach of radical truth-telling had saved us. I was sure of it.

"So then," Oliver said with red eyes, "what do we do now?"

We looked at each other, none of us knowing quite what to say. Finally I raised a shoulder and said, "Go home, I suppose."

"It's going to be strange having the duke's family here," John commented. "I wonder if Mrs. Wolcroft had any advance notice of their coming."

Tyson let out a low whistle. "If she did, it can't have been more than a day or two. She's got to be in a right state about now."

The poor housekeeper. If this visit—by the entire ducal family, no less—was a surprise, she was likely in fits.

"We'd best go see what we can do to be of help," John said, motioning to Tyson. Then he looked to the rest of us. "Turn out the lamps before you go, will you?"

"We'll take care of everything," I assured him. The furniture in the sitting room would need to be covered again and the fire doused. We'd leave this old wing as we'd found it—cold and empty.

Oliver ran back to Sutton as soon as we'd put out the lamps and tidied the sitting room. Rowan and I took our time. We walked out of Bridgefield's old wing, the door shutting behind us sounding hollow and ominous. Yet the moon was bright and the stars twinkled as we walked hand in hand toward Sutton Manor.

"Do you think that's the end of it?" I asked. "Are we really just going to be able to walk away from what just happened without punishment?"

"I certainly hope so." He gave my hand a squeeze.

"It's hard to believe."

Rowan thought that over for a few moments. "Yes, but it shouldn't be."

"What do you mean?" Did he not realize how *miraculous* our pardon was?

"We were right," he said, like he was trying to convince someone who wasn't here. "What we did was right. We did it for the good of the people."

"Yes, but it still feels like the ground is about to crumble beneath me. This is the way that it *should* be, but what should be isn't always the same as reality. This seems far too tidy." So tidy that it was hard for me to trust it.

"I wouldn't call it tidy. There's still plenty to deal with."

"You know what I mean. Just the fact that he understood at all is hard to accept. All the stories that I've heard about the ducal family are not flattering. I never imagined them as understanding or even as rulers who wanted the best for their people."

"Yes, but keep in mind that it wasn't the ducal family that pardoned us. It was the duke himself. I'm not sure we would have received the same from the duchess or from Lord Rockwell."

That was very true. The duchess had not seemed pleased that the duke had left us unscathed. But

even so. "I suppose I just wasn't expecting a duke to actually care."

He gave a solemn nod. "That took me by surprise as well."

"Hopefully we won't have any other occasions to see the less-understanding side of him," I said. "In fact, I'd be happy never to be in his presence ever again." I was sure I'd used up all my luck with that one encounter.

"Don't count on it. I imagine the duke's going to come looking for us as soon as he realizes that he never asked where we stashed the hoard."

I stopped in my tracks, a hand going to my mouth as I stared at him in shock. "I completely forgot about that." A laugh burst from my lips. "We have a wagon full of stolen treasure hidden in the woods and the duke didn't even ask after it."

Rowan nodded with a grin, and we fell into silence as we picked our way through the trees and undergrowth of the woods that separated Bridgefield from Sutton lands.

The silence allowed my mind to churn over the events of the past two days, and the more I thought, the more all the fear came flooding back, causing my stress to mount and eventually leaving me frantic. That moment—walking through the dark and quiet wood with my hand held gently in Rowan's —didn't feel real because it didn't make sense, and so it felt unfinished, like there was more coming. Surely there was more. It could not be that easy.

I was so caught up in the thrumming of my heart and mind that the tug I felt on my hand startled me out of my thoughts. I looked up at Rowan, who had stopped at the edge of the woods, his eyes fixed on Sutton Manor, his forehead tense.

My own frenzied thoughts quieted, overshadowed by concern for him. "What is it?" I asked.

He took a strained breath. "I just need a moment," he said, breathing deliberately. But instead of his breathing slowing, it sped up, coming with more difficulty until he was almost gasping. The hand that held mine squeezed while his other pressed into his chest and he doubled over, sucking air in and out, in and out, too fast.

I reached out, trying to hold him up. "Rowan?" I asked, trying to sound calm but hearing the panic in my voice. "Are you hurt? Is something wrong?"

He shook his head but didn't answer, only squeezed his eyes shut tighter. I don't think he *could* answer in that moment.

"Sit down," I said, not knowing what else I could do for him. "Just sit for a moment." I did my best to ease him down, but his knees gave out and he landed with a thump.

A gasping sob burst from him, followed by another and another.

I wrapped myself around him, trying to hold him together as his heaving breaths and shaking sobs continued. I held on, rocking back and forth as he fought to get his breathing under control. Seeing his torment was like watching a mirror of what was going on inside myself. And somehow, witnessing his tension and worry and angst pouring out of him also allowed my own to escape as I accepted that the way I felt ready to fly apart inside was normal. It was the natural way to react to such a situation, and my own silent tears seeped into his shoulder as I held him.

"I'm sorry," he said, grasping my hand in both of his and planting a desperate kiss to my palm. "I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. I just..."

"I know," I said.

He looked up at me, his eyes shining and haunted. "You do?" he asked before noticing my own tears. Then his face collapsed in compassion. "You do."

I nodded and swiped the tears from my face. "This—all of this. It's just been...too much."

He closed his eyes and nodded. "I thought you were going to end up in irons," he said. "Or worse."

I nodded, touched that his worry had been for me before himself.

"I was prepared for Reeve and his men." He sniffed and finally took a deep breath. "That situation was manageable. It was a known risk. But when the Duke of Winberg walked in and found us holed up in his own house—" He took in another unsteady breath and let it whoosh out. "I'm tempted to whisk you away right now. To run while we have the freedom to do it."

"I know the feeling."

He turned his face to mine, searching my eyes and pushing a hand into my hair. "And yet you're so much calmer than I."

I examined my own inner turmoil as I took in the way his eyes grazed over my features with love and respect. "Maybe because I know you understand just how serious it was. How lucky we are." I smiled. "Thank you for not being cavalier about it."

That pulled a laugh from him. "If there is anything I am *not* feeling at this moment, it is cavalier. That was *terrifying*."

I buried my face in his neck, anxious to draw in his warmth and strength. Needing to feel the reality of him and me, here in the open air, together.

He kissed the top of my head and banded his hands tightly around me. "We did a good thing, Miri. But I hope we never have to do it again."

I let myself smile at that. "Isabel would be proud of you."

"I know she would..."

His hesitance made me look up.

"But I also hope you're proud of me," he said, his eyes vulnerable.

I kissed his foolish, doubting mouth with soft reassurance. Then I pulled back so he could see the truth in my eyes when I said, "I don't think I could be any prouder."

He let out a soft sigh and then wrapped me in a warm hug. "I love you," he murmured into my hair. Tears jumped to my eyes, immediately spilling over. I swallowed. "Do you really?"

"Most assuredly, my little pickpocket."

I laughed with joy, ecstatic to see the glorious smile on his mouth when he pulled back. I cupped his jaw with my hands, loving the feeling of his stubbled cheeks against my palms. "I love you as well," I confessed, "my reluctant thief."

"I'm hoping I'm a retired thief," he said and then kissed me soundly.

When Hunter heard of our exploits, he was a mess. Part angry, part horrified, part exasperated. I allowed him to yell at me for as long as he liked, knowing that it was his brotherly duty to tell me just how foolish and reckless I'd been. I hoped it made him feel better.

And it made me feel better, enduring his reprimand. It made me feel like I'd paid some sort of penance for my crimes.

Laws, I was a criminal. A pardoned criminal, but a criminal still. Again. I only cringed a little at the thought.

The duke did indeed realize that he had not asked us about the stolen goods. A note was sent to Sutton, requiring the presence of Rowan, Oliver, and myself at Bridgefield. The tone of the note was not alarming, but I still went with a great deal of trepidation. Fortunately, my fear came to nothing. When we arrived, several of the duke's guards accompanied us to where we had hidden the wagon. Then we did our best to identify what items might need to be returned to which villagers. After that, it was left in their hands to determine what to do with the money, though I did hear them talking about utilizing the help of Father Tucker, which was a great relief. He would do right by the people.

It surprised me when Father Tucker decided that the right thing was to have us help return everything. We spent several afternoons holed up in the church, helping Father Tucker divide the spoils for return to the villagers.

Those days of taking pouch after pouch of money and items to whatever person Father Tucker sent us to were surreal.

When I returned a pouch of coins and arrowheads to Wick, it took him several moments of stunned silence to collect himself. Then he came around his table and wrapped me in a bear hug. "Look what you've done, lass!" He laughed and I laughed along with him. "It's an incredible thing. Thank you. Thank you."

Garnet's response was just as effusive but more dramatic. She kissed both of Oliver's cheeks, making him flame bright red, before tossing a handful of spices and several talismans into a bowl so that she could chant over them.

Yes, it was definitely surreal, but it was also healing.

I didn't realize until I was handing back the money that had been stolen—receiving hugs and tears and cries of relief and joy—that I still carried a great deal of shame for what I'd done when I was a child. But doing this—having the opportunity to reverse the process, to give instead of take, to lift the burden instead of adding to it, left me humbled and grateful.

Going back to life without the threat of Reeve and without the master and mistress in residence was a change. One that Rowan and I took advantage of. There were several moments when I doubted that what he and I had built among the stress and adventure of the last months would last. I thought perhaps he would tire of me or that I would find him less interesting. But that never happened. His face lit up each time he saw me. I spent a number of meals with him and his parents in their cottage as I got to know them better. He always seemed proud to have me near, whether we were with his parents, with the other boys, or by ourselves. And the ache to be near him that had plagued me didn't ever really go away. I still ached to be near him, to spend more time with him. But fortunately, that hunger was often quenched by the amount of time we were able to spend together—by the way he looked at me, the way he kissed my hand for no reason, and the way he boasted to others about my skills with a bow and arrow.

But while we had more time on our hands, it was obvious that John and the others who worked at Bridgefield had far less. Ansel was bored and lonely without Gretchen's company. He and Oliver did their best to spar and train, but it was different without John, Tyson, and Gretchen there to encourage and challenge them.

It was more than a full week before John was able to come over. Rowan and I were lying out in the meadow, eating apples as we watched the horses grazing, when I saw John walking toward the house.

"Look," I said to Rowan. "John's back."

He turned around to look. "He doesn't have his staff with him."

"That can't be good," I murmured. We stood and followed after him as he walked into the yard and flopped on the ground close to where Oliver was sharpening some tools, clearly exhausted.

Rowan and I caught up as Oliver sat down beside him.

"Where's Gretchen?" I asked as I approached.

John nodded toward the stables. "She and Ansel ran off already."

"And Tyson?"

He shook his head. "Decided to take a real break on our afternoon off."

"So then," Oliver began, "what are you doing here?"

John once again tilted his head in the direction of the stables. "Gretchen insisted."

"I presume your new master and mistress are giving you plenty of work," Rowan said.

He shook his head. "We haven't had a chance to see what Rockwell and his bride will be like. The duke and duchess were here until this morning."

"Ah." That made sense.

"I'm grateful they came," he clarified. "We all are. And I don't mean to complain, especially when his arrival saved us all from..."

"Shackles?" I suggested.

"Death," Oliver volunteered.

John nodded. "Knowing that Reeve and his men are imprisoned and justice will be done...it's more than I hoped for."

We all fell silent, taking a collective moment to be grateful for our freedom.

"Having a duke in residence isn't easy though," John explained. "Because they came unannounced, every moment since has been filled with frantic preparations and cleaning and extra chores. The housekeeper and butler were ready to snap by the end of it."

"But the duke and duchess are gone now?" I asked.

"Yes. Thankfully." He rubbed his hand over his eyes. "And Lady Rockwell was the one to give us all permission to take the afternoon off, so she has a heart at least."

That was good. I knew that the kindness of a good mistress could go a long way.

"And what of Lord Rockwell?" Rowan asked.

John cut his tired eyes over to us and gave a limp shrug. "That remains to be seen. Maybe he'll turn out like his father—hard but fair. Or maybe he's just the same self-righteous, underhanded man he's always been."

I pulled back a little, surprised by his bitterness.

"You can't be too angry with him," Oliver said, seeming to know more of the situation than I did. "His machinations are the reason you started training. It's what got us all here."

"Falstone got us here," John countered.

"Machinations?" I had to ask.

John sighed, whether from annoyance or fatigue I couldn't be sure. "Lord Rockwell had me spy on Sir James."

"What? When?" I asked.

"Years ago. I was young and excited to help, but Sir James caught me, so it didn't last long."

It took a moment for the pieces to fit together in my mind. "And that's how Falstone found out you wished to be a spy?"

"A soldier," he corrected, then turned his eyes toward the cottage where Falstone and his family lived. "I'm glad he's back. We're all getting rusty."

I cut my eyes over to Rowan and found him looking at me. He and I weren't dependent on training with Falstone, and I knew that Rowan didn't consider himself rusty, but neither of us said anything.

When I looked back at John, his eyes narrowed a little bit. "And what about you lot? What are you going to do when Sir James and Princess Marilee return?"

I shrugged. "Start working again."

We all chuckled at that.

Two weeks later, we awaited the arrival of Sir James and Princess Marilee. I didn't know how the others felt about their imminent arrival but my insides were knotted. Emeline had tried to reassure me that Sir James and Her Highness would be understanding and even proud of what I and the others had accomplished, but I simply didn't know them well enough to be confident in such things.

I needn't have worried. They arrived in a flurry of carriages, trunks, squeals, and chatter. Marilee hugged Emeline and Beatrice and squeezed the hands of many of the other servants. I stayed near the back of the gathering, doing my best to be invisible, but she still managed to catch my eye and give me a warm smile.

Clearly they didn't have any idea what had transpired while they were gone.

They went inside and proceeded to resettle themselves back into their home, and I happily escaped to the kitchen.

It wasn't until after the evening meal that Princess Marilee came into the kitchen with a determined step. She stopped just in front of me, where I was kneading a ball of dough for tomorrow's bread, and set her hands on her hips. "You, my dear, have quite the story to tell."

I felt the blood drain from my face, leaving it cold and numb.

"Oh heavens!" she exclaimed and reached across the counter to grab my hand. "Don't go fainting. I just wanted to hear of your adventures. Come sit down." She kept a hold of my hand from across the counter and carefully led me out from behind it and to a chair. "Gracious," she said to Emeline, who had fetched me a cup of water. "Am I that intimidating?"

I calmed myself easily enough once I realized that she really was there to hear a good story and not to reprimand me. As she sat across the table from me, her attention rapt, I told her the whole of the story and watched as the shock, indignation, and anger played out across her face.

"I told you," she said to Emeline, who had joined us. "Did I not tell you all? Cecily and I knew that he was an unworthy choice for the position, but I had no idea the lengths to which he would go." Her indignation was gratifying.

When I got to the part about Lord Edmund Rockwell having returned to Bridgefield for good, her eyes went immediately in that direction, though there was nothing but trees to see out the window. "Lord Rockwell has returned, then?" she asked quietly.

I nodded.

"That will be a change." She didn't expound and was soon called away by Seraphina.

The next day, Oliver and I ended up telling the tale to Cecily and Falstone as we were gathered in the yard. Cecily's reaction was less effusive than Marilee's. She became quiet but her eyes and her jaw hardened with the telling of it, and Falstone had to reach over and unclench her fists at one point. Still, there was clear approval in her eyes once I'd finished.

Over the coming days, I noticed that I felt an odd connection with both Cecily and Marilee that I hadn't felt before. I'd always remained a bit outside of the inner circle of women who had come from Bridgefield, but after I'd shared my story with them, our relationship shifted. It was a bit startling

though certainly not unwelcome. I was starting to feel like I had more family than just Hunter. I had Emeline and Nellie. I had Rowan. And now, I might even have Cecily and Princess Marilee. Not a bad collection for a girl whose father didn't want her.

Sir James and Princess Marilee had been back for a week. The house was once again filled with the squeals and cries of little Gabriella, as well as the (sometimes demanding) tones of Seraphina.

Marilee's ecstasy over hearing that Emeline was expecting could be heard throughout the entire house. It was a good thing that she and Hunter weren't trying to keep it a secret.

Life was busy again but not overwhelming. The market had returned to the bustling, pleasant experience it had been before Reeve's lawless reign. The duke and duchess had returned to the capitol, but because Lord Rockwell and his wife remained behind, John and the other Bridgefield servants continued to be busy, so we saw far less of them.

Rowan continued to teach me the finer points of archery, though that was sometimes interrupted by what Rowan referred to as "being a dutiful suitor," wherein he talked with, teased, kissed, and entertained me in many varied ways.

I didn't deserve him. He was everything I could have ever hoped for and I eagerly awaited the day when he could stop merely being my suitor. But for now, I was happy to simply be with him as I nocked an arrow and drew it back.

My stance was much more confident than it had been four months ago. My hand was steadier as well—at least until Rowan stepped up behind me. He placed a hand at my waist and I rolled my shoulder as a shiver skittered down my spine.

"Everything all right?" he asked before pressing a kiss to the side of my neck.

I grinned. "Everything is perfect." I refocused my aim and released the arrow on an exhale.

Then I threw an elbow back, hitting Rowan in the stomach.

He groaned but it quickly melted into a laugh.

I turned to face him, placing my hands on my hips. "That's what you get for trying to distract me."

"I must be losing my touch," he lamented. Then he reached out, pulling me toward him and linking his hands behind my back.

"Yes," I said, going up on my toes so I could kiss him. "I'm afraid I know all your tricks and am therefore immune to them."

"All of them?" he asked with a challenging lift of his brow as his hands wandered up and down my back.

I fought a shiver. "Yes, all."

He grinned as though thankful for the challenge. Then he reached over his shoulder with one hand and pulled an arrow from his quiver, holding it in front of me with the fletching up. "What about this?" he asked.

"What about it?" I asked, amused by his dramatics. Then I caught the glint of metal among the feathers. I looked closer.

Wedged on to the shaft of the arrow and creasing the feathers—was a ring.

The tiniest gasp sounded from my mouth and my eyes shot up to his. I tried to breathe but my shock and joy made it difficult.

One corner of his mouth turned up in a hopeful way as a question shimmered in his eyes. "Marry me, Miri?"

Tears rushed into my eyes as I threw my arms around him. "Of course."

"Of course?" He sounded surprised. "Just like that?"

"Shall I feign doubt?" I asked on a laugh, pulling back.

He shook his head and pressed a firm kiss to my mouth. "No, not at all." Another kiss. And another. Then he slowed down and let his mouth hover just above mine. "That response will do just fine." He brushed his lips back and forth over mine as his hand went into the back of my hair. "I love you, Miri."

I sighed and kissed him. "I love you." *The End*

To My Readers

Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed Miriam and Rowan's story.

Since I'm an indie author, your support and feedback makes all the difference in the success of my books. Please take just a minute to leave a review (a sentence or two is great) for other potential readers on Amazon, Goodreads, or anywhere else. Word of mouth is essential for me to get the word out, so if you enjoyed reading *The Swindler's Daughter*, tell a friend! Take a photo of the book and post it on social media. Tag me. I'd love to see my readers out in the world.

If you would like to receive updates and have access to bonus material like deleted scenes or scenes from my heroes' points of view, please go to my website and sign up for my newsletter.

You can also follow me on Twitter (@AnnetteKLarsen), Instagram (@AnnetteKLarsen), or <u>Facebook</u>. Happy reading!

Annette K. Larsen

Acknowledgements

This book made me so grateful for my critique group. We took several months away from our critiquing last year, which meant that most of *Cloaked in Scarlet* didn't go through my group. This resulted in beta reads not going smoothly and a lot of tough reworks. Being able to run *The Swindler's Daughter* through my group and have them clean it before I even got to the developmental edit stage was such a big help and gave me a renewed appreciation for all the time and work we all put in for each other.

Thank you to my beta readers, both old and new. Thank you to Jana for all your amazing feedback and your tireless and excellent editing.

Also by Annette K. Larsen

Books of Dalthia series:

Just Ella

Missing Lily

Saving Marilee

Painting Rain

Keeping Kinley

Tales Of Winberg series:

Hooked

Cloaked in Scarlet
The Swindler's Daughter

Contemporary:
If I Could Stay
All Our Broken Pieces
All That Stands Between Us
Songs for Libby

Each book in both the Winberg series and the Dalthia series focuses on a different character. There are no cliff-hangers.

You can find all my books on Amazon.

About the Author

I was born in Utah, but I migrated to Arizona, Missouri, and Virginia before settling in Idaho.

I love words. I always have. And though I dabbled in writing throughout school, becoming an author was never a goal of mine because I never imagined it would be possible. It took me seven years to write my first book, *Just Ella*. During that time, I taught myself how to write a novel through a whole lot of trial and error. Not the most time-effective method, but it gave me an education I wouldn't have received from a class or a how-to book. Something about the struggle of writing without a formula or rules worked for me.

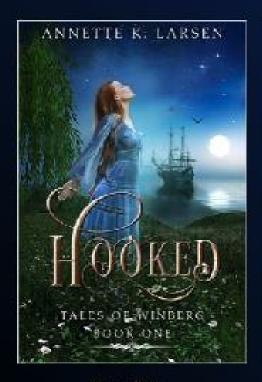
I write clean romance because I love it. Jane Eyre is the hero of my youth and taught me that clinging to your convictions will be hard, but it will bring you more genuine happiness than giving in ever can.

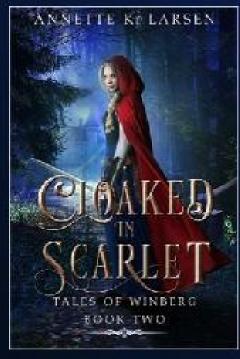
I love chocolate, *Into the Woods*, ocean waves, my husband, and my five littles. And I love books that leave me with a sigh of contentment.

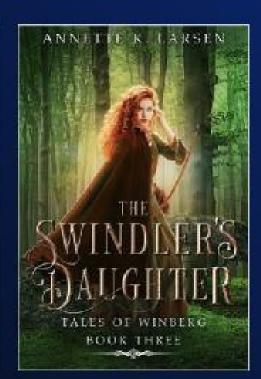
If you'd like to be notified when I release the story of Johnny and Melody, you can follow my Amazon profile.

If you missed Cecily or Emeline's stories, you can find the rest of the <u>Tales of Winberg series here</u>.

Tales of Winberg







Peter Pan

Little Red Riding Hood

Robin Hood



Just Ella Books of Dalthia, #1

Chapter 1

I'll admit that my decision was impetuous. Only the crates and barrels crammed into the wagon would hide me from view as it pulled away from the kitchens, but it was my best chance. The supply wagon had just been sitting there, and upon overhearing the men talking about their plans to visit the caravan of traders in the village, the possibility of a taste of freedom made me reckless.

So here I sat, bumping along, hoping I could make it through the gates without being caught.

I dared to peek around a barrel to check on my progress and saw that we were rounding the edge of the castle. We had only to make it through the gardens and we would be at the gate.

Crouching down once more, I sent a plea to heaven that my ramshackle plan might succeed, but only a moment later, a guard called the wagon to a halt.

Cursing my luck, I scooted back and ducked even lower, anticipating a good amount of disappointment and humiliation. I heard a ripping sound as I moved and knew that a hole had been torn in my dress. I ignored it and held my breath, hoping the wagon would be allowed to move on without an inspection.

"Princess."

I scrunched my face in irritation and looked up at the guard gazing down at me. I stood, knowing my adventure was over. The guards surrounding the wagon were no surprise; however, the swords pointed threateningly at the drivers were.

- "What are you doing?" I demanded.
- "Are you well, Princess?" asked one of the guards.
- "Of course I'm well." I tripped over crates and scrambled out of the wagon bed, ignoring the hands that offered assistance. "And these men had no idea that I was in their wagon until you made them stop. Put your weapons down at once."
- "You got in on your own?" The guard's confusion was understandable, but I still found it irritating.
- "Yes, now let these men be on their way."

As they reluctantly lowered their swords, I noticed several servants watching the spectacle, and started to worry about the potential ramifications of my actions. I had only a moment to hope that my mother would not be told before I heard her voice ring out across the courtyard.

"Ariella."

- My stomach dropped and I looked up, then immediately back down as I encountered the eyes of the queen, so similar to mine, as she stood rigid on the palace steps.
- "Coming, mother." Gathering my poise, I hurried past the baffled guards and confused servants, my head held high as I joined my mother. The fact that she had witnessed my failed adventure only added to my humiliation. I followed her into the castle and up the stairs to the sitting room attached to my parents' chambers.
- The door shut with a snap. "Explain yourself."
- I sighed, resigned to simply tell the truth. "The caravan of traders have come and I wanted to see them."
- "So you decided to go in the back of a supply wagon?"
- "It's not as though there's any other way I would be able to go."
- "There is nothing amid the trinkets of traders that would interest you, and travelers are notorious swindlers. But that is not really the point, is it? Why would it even enter your head to attempt to ride out of the palace in the back of a wagon? Why, Ella?"
- I didn't know how to answer.
- "It's dangerous. Do you not know that? Do you know what it looks like when you so openly defy me?"
- I kept silent.
- "Your defiance, your complete lack of decorum and your sneaking around the servants does not look right and it *must stop*."
- I stared at the ground and clenched my teeth, trying to keep the hurt at bay. My mother was embarrassed by me. "I don't *sneak* around them. I'm just interested in the things they do."
- Her tone softened a fraction. "I know that you are curious; you always have been. But if you insist on indulging your curiosity, then you will not do so in *public*." I could feel her gaze boring into the top of my head, but I refused to look up and it wasn't long before I heard the retreat of her footsteps and the sound of the door as it snapped shut.
- I stared out the window onto a spectacular view of Dalthia. The palace lawn sloped down past the gardens to meet the wall surrounding the extensive grounds. Beyond that barrier, the common village sprawled out until it met the river, which wove through the dense trees like a silk ribbon through a braid. On the other side of the river were the houses belonging to the nobility, and far beyond what I could see, nestled between rolling hills, rested many outlying villages and estates.
- But I was too caught up in my own thoughts, my own hurt and disappointment, to appreciate any of it.
- "Fine," I muttered defiantly. If my mother wanted me to hide where no one would see me, then I would go back to the maze.
- I hurried down the grand staircase and out the door without acknowledging the guards in my usual friendly manner.
- Making my way through the public portion of the gardens, I held my head high, knowing that several noblemen might be following my movements with their curious eyes. The palace served not only as my home, but as the central meeting place for all government. The landlords who oversaw the outlying villages had regular meetings with my father, as did the magistrates and peace officers. I expected the scrutiny of noblemen, but still hated it.
- A smile tugged at the corners of my mouth as I reached the hedge walls of the maze and entered. I inhaled the intoxicating fragrance, remembering the hours my sisters and I had spent running through this house of nature.
- The maze had been my playground as a child, but at twelve years old I was pronounced too old for such frivolity. So I had stayed away. Because I *wanted* to do as I was told—to be everything they expected me to be. But clearly, my ability to act properly had not been helped by avoiding the maze. So it was with a fair amount of spite that I returned here now.
- Walking into the rooms of nature-grown walls, I saw a great deal of change since I used to play here—or perhaps I just saw it differently. Compared to the rest of the gardens, the maze was much less tidy. Some plants and bushes grew into the paths I followed; others had climbed the hedges and hung overhead, their blossoms dripping from the sky.
- The maze was arranged with narrow pathways mingling with wide open rooms. A few of the rooms were almost entirely enclosed, but most tended to run into each other in a rambling, nonsensical way.
- The scent of lilac and roses filled my lungs, easing the tension in my shoulders. I wished I could take down my light hair so the breeze could blow through it, but I knew that I wouldn't be able to tame it into submission myself. I loved my hair, but its thick, loose curls made it unruly.
- It was difficult to remember the layout of the maze, but I found a round room with every color of rose bush sweeping the perimeter, surrounding a large tree in the center. I remembered the tree and was happy to discover that my height, combined with the height of a bench now situated beneath it, would allow me to climb it.
- I chewed my bottom lip and cast my eyes around to see if I dared attempt such a thing now. I hiked my skirts and stepped onto the bench, then grabbed a limb and used the back of the bench to lift me higher before pulling myself into the branches of the tree. Fifteen years old. A princess. And still I did it.
- Fifteen years old, but in just a few weeks I would be sixteen, and I dreaded the day. Somehow I knew that Prince Jeshua would start to pursue me in earnest once I was all of sixteen. Avoiding him had become a talent of mine over the years and was one of the reasons I was so good at being places where I didn't belong. He could have chosen any one of my sisters, but he had fixated on me. I pushed the unpleasant thought aside and climbed higher.
- Pleased with my own daring, I looked at the leaves surrounding me and realized I was largely obscured from the view of anyone not standing directly below the tree. I stepped carefully from branch to branch, hoping I might watch people unobserved from this height.
- Once I could see above the hedge, I found a gap in the leaves and gazed around, proud of my success as I watched a visiting nobleman and woman as they strolled arm in arm. I looked farther and caught sight of a gardener I'd never seen before. He was quite

young, not much older than myself, and rather rough looking. He dressed in earth tones—a loose fitting shirt and brown breeches. He was tall and lean with dark, tousled hair. A satchel hung across his body, some sort of foliage sticking out of it. When my eyes returned to his face, I realized that he had stopped his work to watch me, his eyebrows raised.

Then he smiled—not as though he were being polite or tactful, but just because he was amused. Because of me.

My eyes widened and I crouched down. Apparently I wasn't as well hidden as I had thought. What was I thinking? If my mother heard of my antics, she would put an immediate end to any and all excursions.

I started to make my way down. If I could get out of this tree without anyone else seeing me, then perhaps I could find another tree in a more secluded corner of the maze, or one with thicker leaves.

I was just about to step onto one of the lowest branches when the gardener appeared just a few paces from the tree.

"Stay aloft a bit longer. There is someone coming." He disappeared before his words had fully registered. When they did, I found myself hugging the large trunk and hoping that whoever ventured near would soon be gone.

I heard their approach and tried to take even breaths. Through the gaps in the leaves, I caught glimpses of the couple as they strolled, unconcerned, along the path and out the other side.

As their voices faded, I breathed easier until a noise startled me.

The gardener had jumped onto the bench below. "All clear, Miss." The lightness in his face and voice left me stunned until he reached a hand toward me. "Do you need a hand?"

I lowered myself, hoping to look dignified—or at least as dignified as one can look when climbing a tree—but didn't know how to get out of the tree once I ran out of branches.

"Sit down here." He slapped the lowest branch and I did as he bade, my legs dangling as I prepared to lower myself.

"Hands on my shoulders now."

My eyes widened, but I did as he asked. He grabbed hold of my waist and lowered me to the bench. My hands dropped from his shoulders and I tried not to stare.

"You're all right then?" he asked.

"I don't usually climb trees."

He quirked a corner of his mouth. "That I had already guessed." He jumped from the bench then handed me down. "I've not seen you wandering the maze before."

My mind was a jumble. I wasn't used to people speaking so freely with me. My silence seemed to remind him of our difference in station and his face lost its laughter. He stepped back.

"A good day to you, My Lady."

He turned but I stopped him. "I thank you," I blurted. "For your—assistance."

He inclined his head, pinching the brim of his hat. "A pleasure."

"I'm Ella," I said on impulse. It was an almost unconscious decision, introducing myself as Ella. Only my family knew me as Ella. Perhaps I would have felt too high and mighty introducing myself to this down-to-earth, rough character, as Ariella—Her Royal Highness, the princess—Ariella.

Instead of lightly grasping the tips of my fingers and bowing low over my hand, as I was accustomed to, he took hold of my hand with both of his and gently inclined his head while smiling at me with his eyes. "Glad to meet you, Ella." I gave a small, inaudible gasp. No one outside of my family addressed me without my title. No one. I wondered for a moment if he were being purposefully disrespectful, but he seemed entirely unaware of the gaffe. "My name is Gavin."

I gave a fleeting curtsy and replied, "A pleasure," out of habit. I knew I must have had the appearance of a startled deer—eyes wide and wary, rooted to the spot.

"What brings you to this portion of the gardens? I'm not used to seeing people strolling all by themselves."

"Oh, well," I stumbled, knowing very well that he hadn't seen me strolling at all.

"Hiding away?" He seemed genuinely curious about this point.

"I suppose."

"Hm." He seemed a bit puzzled. "I have never seen a noble who wished to hide away."

"I'm not nobility." It was an automatic response because it was the truth.

"Oh, you're not?" he seemed amused by this. "Then perhaps a lowly servant who has stolen her mistress' clothing? Or maybe the daughter of a dressmaker, taking liberties with her parents' goods?"

That's when I realized he hadn't recognized me. He must have never had the opportunity of seeing me up close. I suddenly appreciated my impulsive decision to introduce myself as Ella. Perhaps if he could get to know me—even a little bit—before he found out who I was, then...I don't know...we could be friends? Was that even possible?

out who I was, then...I don't know...we could be friends? Was that even possible?

"So, you assume if I'm not nobility, I must be a thief?" I tried to sound affronted, but felt a bit giddy about the whole situation, and ended up sounding more amused than anything.

His grin broadened. "And what would you have me believe, miss? I'm no expert on dresses, but I know it takes a lot of coin to look as good as you do right now."

My mouth dropped open a bit. "I believe that is the most backhanded compliment I've ever received, sir."

"Sir?" he let out a laugh. "The lady in the fine dress calls me 'sir,' and I'm to believe you are not noble?"

"And what exactly do you have against nobility?"

"Nothing, really. I'm simply used to working for what I want and need. Nobility already have that and so they seem a bit...." He trailed off.

"What?" I asked in horror. If he had such a low opinion of nobility, I couldn't imagine what he would think of me.

"Well, lazy, if you must know."

I let out a breath of unbelief and searched my mind for an argument.

"You know," he continued, "for a person who claims *not* to be nobility, you've certainly got your feathers ruffled."

"You think that because I am given less responsibility than others that I have less value in society?"

Compassion crossed his face, as though sorry to see my distress over the matter. "No. You are simply a different sort of society —one I don't understand."

"But we are all part of the same society."

He laughed, but stopped himself quickly. "That, miss, is entirely untrue. I am surrounded by nobility constantly, but I do *not* interact with them. I'm completely separate—they don't see me." The fact that he did not recognize me made it difficult to argue the point.

An inexplicable sadness settled over me. I was speaking with one of my subjects who believed he was unimportant and invisible. And I could do nothing about it.

"That's really what you believe?" I asked, hoping, perhaps, he was exaggerating or joking.

He gave me a sad smile and shrugged. "I apologize if my bluntness offends you. I figured you would leave if you were upset by me."

"That would be very rude of me."

"It's what I'd expect."

"Why? Because that's what a noble would do?"

"Well." The confusion was back, forcing him to make a slight concession. "Any other noble." It was somewhat gratifying that he no longer felt compelled to lump me with the nobles he despised. However, the fact remained—I wasn't a noble. And I knew he would think even less of me when he knew what I was.

I wouldn't lie. "I told you, I'm not—"

"Come now, Ella. Your tree climbing hasn't got me fooled." He used an almost paternal tone, his eyes laughing. "You are nobility, aren't you?"

I buried my hurt. "No, I'm something worse."

"Oh, come now, I don't think that badly of people. The only thing that might be worse is royalty." How charming he was, even when insulting me.

I stood silent for a moment, wondering if he would catch on. When he continued to gaze at me, I simply said, "Exactly."

A look of horror crossed his face and I gave him a sad smile before turning to leave.

"Oh," I heard him stuttering behind me, sounding utterly mortified. "No, I...my apologies, miss—Your Highness," he corrected himself sharply. "Princess, I'm so very sorry, I..."

I shook my head as I turned to face him again. He looked so different: the confidence, the grin, the amusement were all gone, replaced with a look akin to physical pain. "It's all right," I said quietly. "You're not wrong." I should have inclined my head, waiting for him to bow before I left. Instead I lifted my hand in farewell.

Unwilling to return to the palace, I walked deeper into the maze. My conversation with Gavin had not ended well, but that was no reason to give up my explorations. Coming here had been *my* choice, and I would not leave until I *wanted* to leave. Admittedly, I was disappointed. Speaking with Gavin had been enjoyable; he had been open and had a charming, teasing manner. It was a shame our first encounter would be our last. Even if he didn't despise me for my station, he would no longer be comfortable conversing with me. I was a royal—a lazy, entitled royal.

I was mortified anyone would perceive me that way. And the worst part was that he was right. None of my talents or endeavors were really useful, and I also despised royalty some of the time. Royal suitors were frequent guests in a castle that housed seven princesses. And though some were pleasant enough, I had met my fair share of princes who were supreme examples of arrogant, entitled royalty. Prince Jeshua was one of the worst. Perhaps that's why it bothered me so much. I found being put on the same level as those I scorned appalling.

I entered one of the open rooms and sat down amidst the lush greenery and fragrant blooms, trying to decipher my feelings. I was sad and angry and insulted, yes. But Gavin had sparked another feeling. I felt invigorated—more invigorated than I ever had while defying my parents and evading royal guests, and I was anxious for this excitement to last...

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